Inventing the Buddha

The Glorification of Ascetic Masculinity in Taiwanese Buddhism

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I would like to express my gratitude to the organization and temple which hosted the Triple Platform Ordination. The kindness that was shown is beyond words, and it is almost impossible to convey one's appreciation of the effort countless people contributed so generously and selflessly. The affection and compassion expressed were a testimony to the argument that monks do, as a matter of fact, incorporate characteristics that are deeply Mahāyānist, and that many consider feminine. Here, the focus is with just one aspect of Buddhism in Taiwan. A study with a focus on gender equality would certainly provide much evidence for egalitarianism. Hence I strongly emphasize that this dissertation does not aim at criticizing particular persons or organizations, let alone Buddhism. Rather, it is concerned with structural aspects and entrenched habitual thought patterns.

Several personal thanks are due. I express my heartfelt gratitude to my family for their life-long care, encouragement, and support. Especially the sweetest sister in the world, Tabea, deserves not merely my thanks. I consider myself very blessed to have spent so many years in such a good company.

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In short, had it not been for my teachers, friends and spiritual mentors, this dissertation would never have come into existence.

Omissions, inaccuracies, errors and follies are, of course,
entirely due to my own lack of wisdom and compassion.

∞ *Abstract* ∞

Gender relations in Taiwanese Buddhism have received little public attention (save for the study of two privileged groups and a recent conference in Taipei). This thesis addresses this lacuna by exploring different facets of gender relations and gender hierarchy in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism in reliance on archival as well as ethnographic data.

Inventing the Buddha demonstrates that gender relations among Buddhists in Taiwan are closely related to those of the secular sphere. Although Taiwan society has undergone significant changes, certain traditional features prevail. Correspondingly, traditional and transformed aspects, gender hierarchy and equality, can be observed in Taiwanese Buddhism.

However, Taiwan society remains largely shaped by patriarchal and patrilineal structures. Accordingly, Buddhism abides by similar norms. Female rebirth, for instance, is frequently dualistically conceived. In this framework, women either accept the belief in the inherent inferiority of their female sex and thus espouse more traditional maternal feminine ideals, or they comply with androcentrism – in order to establish their religious eminence – and thus embody the concept of the *Dazhangfu*, the "Great Man".

This masculine paradigm is above all shaped by the perceived masculinity of the historical Buddha. While the *Dazhangfu* has been consummately analyzed as a historical phenomenon, this study evidences its contemporary pervasiveness in Buddhist imagination and practice, reflecting the androcentrism of Buddhism in Taiwan. The *Dazhangfu* entails the masculinization of serious female practitioners, monastics in particular, on all levels – performance, demeanor, mind, voice and action, being glorified to the extent of an almost thorough denial of femininity, manifest also in spiritual amenorrhea, a phenomenon that has hitherto not been documented in Buddhism. The cessation of menstruation due to

menstruation due to spiritual factors is believed to reveal outstanding spiritual attainments – unlike the general assessment of amenorrhea as pathological.

Questions of spiritual amenorrhea are closely entwined with menstrual taboos. This study therefore also assesses menstrual taboos and pollution beliefs. Certain menstrual taboos have vanished while others persist.

In short, continuities and discontinuities structure all levels of Buddhist practice and belief. Gender relations in Buddhism in Taiwan are thus closely tied to the social context. They are neither purely unequal, nor fully based on equality. Rather, different forces coexist and compete.

☙ *Table of Contents* ❧

☙ *Conventions* ❧

Throughout this thesis, pseudonyms are used for all interlocutors. A social profile for interlocutors can be found in the Appendix. Yet, the identities of two interlocutors, abbesses who would be identifiable were their profiles provided, remain undisclosed. So does the place of their temples and interviews. Likewise, the date and place of the Triple Platform Ordination remain unidentified to protect the identity of interlocutors. Scholars may, however, contact the author for elucidation.

In general, the term 'interlocutor' refers to informants with whom the author conversed in conversations and interviews, while 'respondent' refers to those who answered the questionnaire. *Pinyin* is used throughout the text, but place names and customized names, such as Kuomintang and Tzu-chi, are transcribed in their Taiwanese form. In interviews, ... indicates a break by the interlocutor, whereas [...] refers to the editing of the interview and in citations.

Sanskrit terms are spelled out with diacritics, but in some instances (the dots under the 's', 'm', and 'n'), the software did not cooperate. Sanskrit terms that are widely used in current Western literature – such as karma, samsāra, nirvāna, Bodhisattva, and sūtra, are not in italics, but where they appear as parts of titles, they are in italics, as are more uncommon Sanskrit and Chinese terms.

☙ *Tables and Images* ❧

☙ *Introduction* ❧

Prologue

"No, don't go in there", a cleaner yells at me as I am about to enter the toilet for women. It is perhaps the second day after my arrival in Taiwan, and the first time I returned to the University where I studied in 1999, but unlike then, as a nun. "I *am* a woman", I reply in a friendly way, which leaves my interlocutor thunderstruck. "I thought *all* Lamas are male. Sorry."[1] I laughingly return to the room of my former teacher, a professor of Chinese literature and philosophy, the person who can partly be held responsible for the conception of this research. He was the one who, in 1999, said that I had been reborn as a woman due to negative karma. This was the first time I had ever encountered blunt chauvinism, and I took it for exactly that. Approximately two years later, embarrassment ensued when I, then a monastic, related the encounter of the gender-confused woman in the toilet.

"So, tell us, *what* is your research about this time, are you still working on Chinese philosophy?" "No, I'm working on Taiwanese Buddhism." "What aspect?" "Gender." My friends became less inquisitive, and a long moment of silence followed when I said, "Actually, the research is about gender inequality." The boys blushed. The wife of my former Chinese teacher lost herself in distant ruminations, and only the face of a close female friend lit up. I recognized how complex, how provocative the research was going to be. This situation presaged how the phantom patriarchy was later looming at every corner – not a specific Chinese creation, but one appearing in Buddhist disguises, being conjured up by the circumstances I found myself in. It was a phantom I had not challenged before.

"Look at her, she really doesn't look like a woman. You truly look like a man." "Gosh, Shengcai, do you still need to label me as male or female?" "He's right. You sometimes look

[1] Which is, of course, testimony to the androcentric character of Tibetan Buddhism!

like a woman, sometimes like a man, sometimes like a Westerner, sometimes like a Chinese or Tibetan." "I think you don't look feminine, you really resemble a man." "I don't want to look like a man. I *enjoy* being a woman. There is no reason *why* I should look like a man." Two friends had invited me for lunch in a traditional Chinese restaurant in 2002, and we were chatting peacefully. Little had I expected that my friends were bound by apparently culturally specific Chinese, or Taiwanese Buddhist projections – projections I was unwilling to accept, revealing my unvoiced attachment to femininity. They made me realize how deeply gender is rooted in the construction of the self, and how difficult it is to deconstruct.

The first three months in Taiwan, before I left for a break, were replete with similar comments. I felt these comments denigrated me and forced me into a model I did not know or comprehend. I had not been ordained to become a semi-man – an idea that had never crossed my mind. Since I considered myself rather feminine, I experienced the comments about "my" alleged masculinity as affronts. Owing to the support of my academic advisors and spiritual mentors, I returned to Taiwan for further research.

In short, I was puzzled by the fact that Chinese Buddhists in Taiwan perceived me as masculine while Western and Tibetan Buddhists could not understand the basis for such views when we discussed them. Little had it occurred to me how much importance Buddhists in Taiwan attribute to masculinity. The first time an interlocutor connected "my" alleged masculinity with beauty, or dignity, I assumed her to be an odd case. I was initially unaware that the masculine ascetic is *the* spiritual ideal of Buddhism in Taiwan, and possibly China. While I had, on account of archival research, assumed feminine ideals to exist alongside masculine ones, I found femininity primarily evoked in relation to motherhood and traditional female roles and spheres, while masculinity epitomized spiritual cultivation, and especially spiritual perfection. And so, as time passed by, I recognized that being

considered masculine was actually a compliment, not an insult. In the end, I caught myself during interviews checking whether the descriptions of a good practitioner, which were inherently masculine, did not in some way apply to me! I then realized that it was time to leave Taiwan. I had learned to reject femininity in favor of an ascetic masculine ideal that is perhaps a mere cultural construct, an idiosyncrasy. It was a conspicuous concept for me because it had not been part of my spiritual training, or worldview.

As disparaging women is an infraction of a Tantric root vow, this dissertation is as much related to Vajrayāna Buddhism as it is to Chinese, or Taiwanese Buddhism. This might elucidate why a Western Buddhist nun of the Tibetan tradition happens to analyze Buddhist gender relations in Taiwan. Clearly, this research is intimately entwined with "my" persona. Firstly, without my initial observations as a Buddhist laywoman in 1999, this project would not have been conceived. Secondly, without my experiences as a Western female monastic in an androcentric world, this project would not have yielded the results it has as my mere presence provoked spontaneous comments.

Many people approached me out of curiosity regarding the research topic, so that I was not always the instigator of observations or conversations. In particular women, but sometimes men, initiated discussions about women in Buddhism, as Taiwanese Buddhists are well aware that gender equality remains an issue unresolved in Tibetan Buddhism. It was difficult to hide my own opinion when directly asked. Nonetheless, that both men and women approached me regarding gender issues indicates "gender" not to be a topic only scholars talk, write or think about. In general, the most conclusive conversations were those instigated by others, and where as a nun, I appeared as an 'insider'. This casual atmosphere invited them to speak very openly. It was *them* asking *me* about the research, and not *vice versa.* When *I* interviewed *them*, appearing as a researcher, I was often confronted with a wall of silence. Many of my interlocutors and friends who had openly talked about their

experiences and views were indignant when I asked them for a recording. Even the ones who did agree to record often gave different answers during the recording session. There was a certain reluctance to talk about gender in ways that could be played back, or publicly revealed. Correspondingly, one of my advisors had warned me that it might be difficult to rely on recorded interviews alone, because of the controversy and confidentiality of the topic.

Chern (2000) made a similar observation: She was given two contradictory answers by nuns, depending on whether she was with or without a tape recorder. The same occurred during my fieldwork with one abbess. Once, she openly and loudly cursed patriarchal and sexist aspects of institutionalized Buddhism in Taiwan, which she ignored in entirety when recorded. Many questions she had previously discussed during casual conversations were brushed aside with "I don't know". She looked me deep in the eyes and refused to comment any further. It was as if I was talking to a different person. She had formerly shared her most intimate thoughts with me because I was a nun. But with a tape-recorder I was an 'outsider', the "other", elucidating my dual positionality. I was an 'outsider' as a Western scholar, but at the same time an 'insider' as a fully ordained Mahāyāna nun. In this way, "my person" was an observer and simultaneously an observed subject that could reflect views which interlocutors would otherwise not have expressed.

As Wolf and others (1996a) have shown, "studying down" can create serious obstacles for the research. The willingness of interlocutors, they argue, to discuss certain topics depends largely on the positionality of the researcher (Wolf, 1996b: 2, 18). My dual and transformed positionality in Taiwan supports their argument: my initial observations as a laywoman in 1999, compared to those as a Buddhist nun between 2001-2003, showed how a changed positionality can evoke fundamentally different responses.

Moreover, my fieldwork demonstrates people as more readily relating their experiences

and frustrations to a like-minded and like-bodied person, especially when it comes to corporeal intimacies. Here, being a woman researcher assisted the task decisively. As a nun, firstly, people trusted me and I could prompt them, which would have been impossible had I been a laywoman. Had I not been a nun, and immersed myself in the Taiwanese Buddhist world, I would not have been able to record religious beliefs that are important constituents of Buddhism in Taiwan today as certain comments would simply not have been made in relation to me, or in my presence. Thus, I would not have realized that beliefs which were thought to be historical phenomena – such as the *Dazhangfu* – remain prevalent today. Furthermore, nuns and female lay Buddhists often emphasized that they would not have talked about many aspects with a Taiwanese researcher. Hsiung (1996), Tsung (1978) and Kung (1981) discuss the limitations of being 'ethnic insiders' in conducting fieldwork. In comparison, my 'outsider' position allowed for space to retreat and for more critical reflection, used by both interlocutors and myself to account for unusual questions and views. Chinese language proficiency assisted further. Consequently, the virtue of being an 'outsider' and simultaneously an 'insider' allowed for a healthy balance of distance and trust.

In some way, the gendered confusion at the outset of my sojourn in Taiwan turned out to be the very core of my research. While resolving this had not been my objective, as the research progressed, it illustrated an essential problem in Taiwanese Buddhist practice. Only at the end of my stay in Taiwan did I become convinced that the views I had first encountered in 1999 were not unusual. Then, I realized how the findings of the fieldwork confirmed my initial experiences and reflected historical data. The circle closed the day after my return to Australia when I watched "Cave in the Snow", a documentary on the life of Tenzin Palmo (a Western Buddhist nun), where a nun from *Fagushan* 法鼓山 (Taiwan) stated that in Taiwanese Buddhism, people believe women to be spiritually less capable, and that women have to transform into men if they want to achieve Buddhahood. Until then, I

had been faltering in my assessment. I had questioned my objectivity, assuming my background as a Western Vajrayāna nun to render me unwilling to accept these views as Buddhist. In short, I had considered my observations as downright projections of my mind. Perhaps, they are. But I was not, and am not, alone in my assessment. Many Buddhist women in Taiwan equally question(ed) beliefs and practices based on gender hierarchy and gender privilege. This might be argued to ensue due to our ignorance, or attachment to femininity. But the fact that several concepts discussed in this thesis appear to prevail exclusively in Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan (and possibly China) warrants the hypothesis that they are specifically Chinese creations.

In ending of this beginning, I would like to express my hope that some of the observations and ruminations contained herein may be deemed useful and thus be of help. May those who grasp onto rigid concepts realize that sex and gender are but constructs – not only for women, but for women *and* men.

Contents

As a Buddhist practitioner, to me, questions of religious, or spiritual practice seemed most pertinent. Hence, I observed gender relations in Taiwan through the lens of what respondents, interlocutors and friends considered "spiritual practice". This might explain why some of my conclusions differ from those of other scholars more preoccupied with scriptural approaches or questions of status. Spiritual practice, be that in canonical terms of study, contemplation, and meditation, or in more contemporary forms such as charity and disaster relief, and so on, is essential to the survival of Buddhism, and is considered the only means to attain one of the different Buddhist goals. And yet, discussions on gender and women in Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhism have analyzed the topic largely divorced from issues related to spiritual practice. This thesis, in focusing on spiritual practice, demonstrates

some commonly accepted views as not corresponding to actual practice and interpretation, whereas ethnographic data corroborates other theories.

Many Buddhists in Taiwan believe that outstanding female practitioners stop menstruating. This belief is deeply entrenched in Chinese culture, yet it is also shaped by Buddhist androcentrism. Spiritual amenorrhea, the induced cessation of menstruation, can only be understood in the context of androcentrism. It is closely entwined with the imagined masculinization of female practitioners, a reflection of the confluence of Buddhist doctrine and specific Chinese cultural assumptions. This model of ascetic masculinity, which many claim to be androgyny, is paralleled by a model of femininity that is closely connected to traditional images of women as mothers. Many female monastics appear to aspire to the masculine ascetic ideal whereas most laywomen rather emulate secular ideals of the traditional nurturing mother. Hence both can safely be juxtaposed as monastic *versus* lay paradigms.

Chapters One and Two first suggest to the reader the relevant Taiwanese, Chinese and Buddhist background, especially theories regarding gendered embodiment. Chapters One and Two do not aim at providing a detailed discussion of all related issues, be that in the discipline of the study of Chinese religions, anthropology, or Buddhist studies. Rather, they are brief general introductions for readers not acquainted with Taiwanese society, or Buddhism. Chapters One and Two nevertheless address issues that are important for the understanding of the main body of the thesis.

Chapter Three contends the success of one of the biggest Buddhist organizations in Taiwan to be closely tied to the broader context of gender relations in Taiwanese Buddhism – specifically, its promulgation of a specific model of femininity. The discussion of this contemporary, predominantly female, Buddhist organization demonstrates how it encourages the model of the nurturing mother for laywomen. While this model could

simply be considered a fortress strong enough to safeguard traditional ideas, it might equally be a surreptitious crusade against certain aspects of hegemonic (Buddhist) masculinity.

Chapter Four then reveals gender hierarchy as it surfaces in Buddhist rituals and beliefs, elucidating the conception of the dualistic nature of female embodiment. Gender hierarchy is often expressed in pollution beliefs, and menstrual taboos. Consequently, Chapter Five focuses on menstruation taboos, demonstrating that certain menstrual taboos persist while others have vanished. Some pollution beliefs retain influence in popular religious circles, but not among Buddhists. In the Buddhist context, taboos couched in paternalistic rhetoric have survived whereas taboos based on more sexist arguments are largely ignored by women today. Chapter Five thus contextualizes menstruation taboos in the framework of Buddhist beliefs and elucidates both their continuity and discontinuity, reflecting a changed self-perception of Buddhists and of women.

Despite this change of emphasis, negative attitudes toward the female body and female reproductive processes might contribute to the suppression of menstruation. Chapter Six therefore focuses on the ideal of the cessation of menstruation and 'religiously sanctioned amenorrhea'. Empirical data provides considerable evidence for the belief in this phenomenon, although it cannot be understood as resulting from menstrual taboos alone. Instead, spiritual amenorrhea only gains credence in the context of specific Buddhist and Chinese views, discussed in Chapter Seven.

The masculinization of female Buddhists through the *Dazhangfu* ideal directly influences attitudes toward female bodies, and hence menstruation. Consequently, the *Dazhangfu* rhetoric, here analyzed in its historical and contemporary perspective, illustrates the very crux of Buddhist gender relations in Taiwan. Here, again, a transformation and continuity of certain views can be established. This comparison of the past and present elucidates that despite a change of emphasis, earlier texts and remembered histories live on

in contemporary interpretations. In this phenomenon, most aspects discussed in the previous chapters converge.

Methodology

Throughout the first six months, I observed Taiwanese Buddhism and gender issues in a fairly unstructured way. Rather than confining myself to one particular temple, I decided that remaining outside the institutionalized religious structure would be more beneficial, as I feared my overall perspective to be curtailed once committed to one specific temple, or organization. As a nun, I would have been provided with all necessities, and been treated with hospitality unheard of anywhere in the West. Under such circumstances, it would have been difficult to write about gender objectively and openly.

Furthermore, unlike other unpublished studies which focus on gender relations in Taiwanese Buddhism in reliance on interviews with members of what I would call the institutionalized Buddhist elite, and those which focus on two privileged and thus not necessarily representative groups, my aim was to record the views of "ordinary" Buddhists, whose beliefs and practices have been largely ignored. Moreover, gender is rarely publicly discussed in Taiwanese Buddhism, and if so, in a rather prescriptive manner.

For this reason, one thousand questionnaires were distributed among Taiwanese Buddhists in a number of temples, a Buddhist seminary, several urban Buddhist groups, a temple where popular religious and Buddhist practices coexist, and a retreat facility. These are located in Taipei city, Kaohsiung city and county, and Hsinchu county, but the names and precise locations of the participating institutions remain undisclosed for questions of confidentiality. The distribution of the questionnaire firstly allowed me to gather confidential data across a wide spectrum of social profiles, and secondly precluded the suggestion that one specific organization has particularly severe gender problems. Only one

hundred and twenty-two questionnaires were returned. In this study, I only consider the questionnaires of respondents born in Taiwan as my focus is with Buddhism in Taiwan.[2]

The questionnaire, however, does not constitute the main data for this discussion. Instead, it is used throughout the thesis to supplement data gathered in conversations and interviews, of which many could not be recorded because, as stated in the *Prologue*, gender in general, and menstruation and secondary amenorrhea in particular, are sensitive issues that people felt uneasy talking about with a recorder. Especially those who knew about, or had experienced the phenomena discussed in Chapter Six were almost unanimously unwilling to record. Moskowitz, studying beliefs and practices related to abortion and fetus ghosts observed the same: "On the whole, the tape recorder made people feel uncomfortable [...] only when the interviews were supposedly over and I had stopped taping they began to give me more interesting information" (Moskowitz, 2001: 4). Similar to Moskowitz, much information I gathered thus emerged from informal conversations, where interlocutors always knew that I was doing research on gender issues. Yet, I did record several structured and semi-structured interviews, as well as single and group discussions with twelve interlocutors. Much of the data analyzed in this thesis relies on these recorded interviews as they repeat what I encountered in casual conversations. The interviews were all conducted by myself, in Chinese, in the casual atmosphere of a very peaceful monastic setting in Northern Taiwan with a randomly selected sample. I worked qualitatively with a smaller number of Buddhists rather than conducting a large number of interviews with unfamiliar people. Most interlocutors were well acquainted with me.

In addition to interviews and questionnaires, I participated in and thus conducted participant observation during a Triple Platform Ordination (novice vows, full ordination

[2] Respondents had the freedom to take the questionnaire home to answer the questions at their leisure and return them anonymously, which might account for the low response rate.

and Bodhisattva vows) of women and men, which provided me with revealing insights into Taiwanese Buddhist gender relations. We received rigorous training from 4.30 am until 10 pm, including teachings on the *Vinaya*, etiquette and various other topics. I did not record interviews during this period, but rely on participant observations and conversations.

This dissertation is not based on fieldwork alone, because the discussion of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist phenomena requires a thorough understanding of historical and doctrinal dimensions of Chinese culture, and Buddhist views. Current phenomena cannot be cogently elucidated without their socio-cultural, religious and historical context. As King argues, "religion cannot be understood without its history and the multi-layered pluralism through which it has found complex social and cultural expressions" (King, 1995: 4). The combination of archival and empirical research gives us at once the power to interpret current phenomena, while linking them to the past. We can thereby elucidate the potential origins of current practices and establish their continuity, or discontinuity. An understanding of their roots in Buddhist doctrine, and changing historical trajectories is as necessary as ethnographic research. Consequently, my analyses interweave archival and ethnographic data.

Each chapter of this dissertation yields a slightly different approach, although ethnographic and archival data are frequently juxtaposed. Chapters One and Two almost exclusively rely on archival data since they provide necessary background information to the study. Chapter Three consists of a critique and reinterpretation of extant literature, as the organization concerned has been studied extensively. Chapter Four, by contrast, relies heavily on participant observation, complemented by conversations and interviews, as gender hierarchy has previously not been discussed widely in the framework of Buddhism in Taiwan. Hence only few studies constitute a point of reference. Chapter Five first discusses archival evidence and recent ethnography, so as to compare data collected during

the 1970s and 1980s with current data. The issues discussed in Chapter Six, on the other hand, have to my knowledge never been researched in a Buddhist context. Chapter Six therefore relies mainly on ethnographic methods. Most of the interlocutors who discussed these issues with me were unwilling to record. I therefore cannot quote them at length. However, because their personal situation is important for the analyses, I describe their persona in more detail than interlocutors in other chapters. Chapter Seven then compares contemporary with historical data. The topic discussed in Chapter Seven – albeit a significant constituent of contemporary Buddhist discourse in Taiwan – has for the most part been studied in a historical perspective, hence the need for a combination of ethnographic and textual methods. This brief overview illustrates how each chapter requires a combination of archival and ethnographic material, yet the emphasis of every chapter differs according to the topic and previous research. While some chapters draw chiefly on archival data, others rely heavily on my own ethnography.

The combination of archival with contemporary data is not new in the study of Chinese religions (for example Jordan and Overmyer, 1986). The masculinization of female Buddhists in Taiwan, for instance, is a phenomenon most interlocutors explained by using Buddhist doctrine. Yet it is also deeply rooted in Chinese culture, and shaped by the pervasive gender hierarchy in Taiwanese society and Buddhism. Taken alone, this phenomenon may appear strange to an observer at first, but analyzed in its socio-cultural, religio-philosophical and historical context, it can be lucidly explained. It is therefore not only crucial to connect past and present in an abstract way for theoretical considerations, but because interlocutors themselves draw on historical and archival data to justify contemporary beliefs and practices. This relationship between the past and the present, practice and belief is structured by continuities and discontinuities.

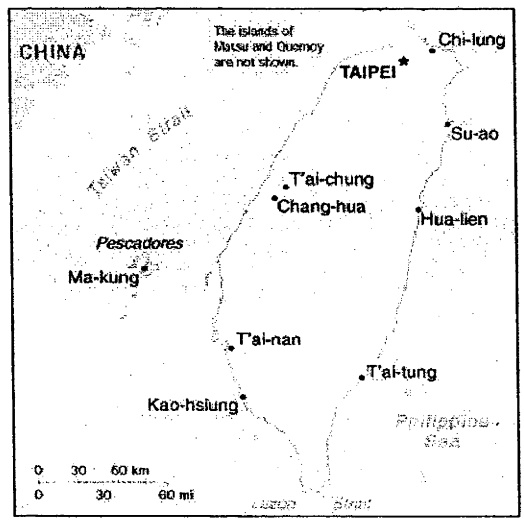
The data presented in this thesis reflects the views of the people I met and talked to.

But I only conversed with a limited number of people. While there is a danger to generalize about Buddhism in Taiwan on account of data that might, or might not be representative, my observations are echoed by historical facets, and appear in different ways in writings by scholars and activists. Conspicuous tendencies can therefore be discerned.

☙ *Chapter One* ❧
Taiwan and Buddhism in Context

A Brief Introduction to Taiwan

Map 1: Taiwan[1]



Taiwan, located in the South China Sea, was under the jurisdiction of several political powers and has thus been influenced by different cultures throughout its history. While the first Hakka settlement is dated to 1111, an official (Chinese) outpost was only established in 1350 by the Mongolian empire. Thereafter, Taiwan was ruled by the Spanish from 1517 until the Dutch colonial rule started in 1624. In 1683, Taiwan came under the rule of the Manchu government, but was ceded to Japan in 1895 at the end of the first Sino-Japanese war, and to the Republic of China in 1945 – in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles. When the Communist Party succeeded in Mainland China in 1949, the National Government Kuomintang 國民黨 ("National Party") and 1.5-2 million of its adherents fled to Taiwan. Since then, the government in Mainland China has been asserting Taiwan to be a province of China (Copper, 1993; Jones, 1999; Moskowitz, 2001: 7), yet many in Taiwan hold opposing views, as the demonstrations in September 2003 revealed. Thus, a certain fear of a possible attack from Mainland China pervades Taiwan society, an aspect reflected in daily discussions of the "Taiwan strait question" in newspapers, on television and in private circles.[2]

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[1] http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countries/asia/ciamaps/tw.htm, no date [Accessed, July 2003].

[2] *Republic of China Yearbook*, online http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook, no date [Accessed, Sep. 2003]. See also the following studies for details: Ahern, 1981; Copper, 1993; Davison and Reed, 1998;

Taiwan was rather an economic backwater until the take-over of the Kuomintang, but its subsequent economic miracle is generally acclaimed (Rubinstein, 1999: 5ff). Even so, since the late 1990s, the economy has suffered. The American military presence between the 1947-1975 influenced Taiwan significantly (Moskowitz, 2001: 7), as did the Japanese period (Rubinstein, 1999: 4).[3] Until recently, historians described life under the Japanese government as repressive, yet many depict the initial rule of the Kuomintang as similarly authoritarian. The first democratic elections were held in 1996. Although then, the Kuomintang retained supremacy, it was for the first time in the history of the Republic of China replaced after the elections in 2000, and 2004.

Taiwan has been affected by profound changes since the beginning of the 20th century, most notably: urbanization, industrialization, commercialization, democratization – summed up as "frenzied modernization", to borrow Moskowitz' term (Moskowitz, 2001: 8, 94). The population of Taiwan is estimated as 22.5 million, of which 10.96 million are female, and 11.44 million male. Although birth control has led to decreasing birth rates and ideal number of children (Taiwan's birth rates fell by 52% between 1961 and 1978), life expectancy has increased by approximately twenty years, entailing a rapid population increase (3 million in 1906 versus 22.5 million in Nov. 2002). The population density of Taiwan is thus the second highest in the world, estimated as 622 persons per square kilometer (Moskowitz, 2001: 14, 15).

Taiwan is generally portrayed as having profited from industrialization, rising living

Jones, 1999; Jordan, 1994; Rubinstein, 1999; Weller, 1999, 2001; Wong, 1981.

[3] Throughout the centuries, several waves of migrants arrived at the shores of Taiwan, hence questions of ethnicity were and still are hotly debated. Most interlocutors did not consider themselves Chinese, but specifically Taiwanese. Questions of ethnicity are often politically motivated (in the sense that those who would prefer independence rather proclaim themselves as ethnically and culturally different from Mainland Chinese while those who relocated with the Kuomintang and those favouring closer cooperation with Mainland China would stress their cultural and ethnic heritage to be rooted in Mainland China). However, the earliest inhabitants of Taiwan are definitely not considered "Taiwanese" but as "mountain", or indigenous people.

standards, better education, and democratization. Yet it is questionable to what extent this "frenzied modernization" has increased the *quality of living*, or happiness in Taiwan, a factor statistics rarely consider, because it is hard to assess or study. I observed a lot of anxiety, pressure and stress among interlocutors and friends. Today, environmental degradation, cramped housing, long working hours, population pressure, rising unemployment rates, competition in schools, universities and the workforce, noise pollution and so on are by-products of the "frenzied modernization", which so many interlocutors emphasized as infringing on their quality of living.

The formerly all-important clan-system, for instance, has experienced disintegration not merely due to the profound changes enumerated above, but because many of its former functions have been superseded by government (Wong, 1981: 53-5). While in the past, the extended family is said to have been the family ideal, scholars observed a predominance of nuclear families during the 1980s (Chuang, 1985: 129, 132, 145; Wong, 1981: 71, 178), a trend even more pervasive today. Generally speaking, urbanization and cramped housing are seen as forces curtailing more traditional living arrangements (Moskowitz, 2001: 14, 15). So is the greater mobility of younger people, who now can live separately from their parents, a practice almost unheard of during the 1960s and 1970s.[4] According to Moskowitz, most "men and *unmarried women* work outside the home and have their own income" which endows them with a certain degree of independence (Moskowitz, 2001: 8; emphasis mine).

On average, the age for marriage has risen while arranged marriages have almost vanished. Divorce rates are on the increase even though unequal divorce rights constrained women's choices until recently: The custody for the children and the *wife's* assets *prior to marriage* [*sic*] remained the possession of the *husband* after divorce (Moskowitz, 2001: 16, 23).

[4] Consult for example, standard anthropologies by Arthur Wolf 1974, 1981, 1985 and Margery Wolf 1972 and Wolf and Witke, 1975.

Although these laws were amended in 1996 and 2002 respectively,[5] social practice appears not to have adapted as yet.

At first sight, Taiwan thus appears as an industrialized and urbanized nation – some characterize Taiwan as "modernized". Nevertheless, "modernization" does not automatically entail the complete eclipsing of traditional aspects. Whilst crucial changes have affected Taiwanese society, and certain practices that were formerly considered as fundamental to Chinese culture have almost disappeared, or weakened, others survive in "modern" disguise. Changes are neither universal, nor are they entirely uncontested

Despite structural and social changes, many scholars agree the kinship system to remain at the heart of Taiwanese culture (Davison and Reed, 1994: 168), being patrilineal, patrilocal, and male dominated (Wong, 1981: 64). And so, in spite of structural changes, which are alleged to have contributed to the decline of patriarchal power, traditional Confucian values still structure most people's lives.[6]

[5] According to the *Republic of China Yearbook*.

[6] Here, I would like to seize the opportunity and share my own observations. When I returned to Taiwan in 2001, I noticed that many "traditional" aspects survive in "modern disguise", such as the kinship system. Compliance with more traditional practices today may ensue due to societal or financial pressures, but perhaps, the same holds for the past. Allow me to provide one example. One clan in Kaohsiung collectively built a modern high-rise building on the clan property approximately one decade ago. Although every family has their own flat, the building as a whole is owned by the clan. Where once they socialized in the backyard, social gatherings have been replaced by discussions on the roof and tea sessions in the apartment of the eldest uncle. The eldest son in the apartment I stayed at is expected to take over the flat, while his younger brother and his wife cannot currently move out due to pecuniary difficulties. The mortgage on the flat is so high that both have to contribute. The father passed away several years ago, and the eldest son is now considered the head of the household. All decisions fall upon him. The mother is retired, but used to work seven days per week as a hairdresser. The three children support their mother financially.
This example briefly illustrates the ostensible "modernization" and simultaneous persistence of "tradition". Most notably, female employment and self-confidence, housing arrangements, entertainment and so on have changed while crucial traditional structures persist, such as male dominance. The younger brother and sister strongly resisted the elder brother to the extent of not talking to him, or to each other in his presence. The atmosphere in the family was cold when he was present, which my friend attributed to his domineering attitude. On a whole, I was surprised how strongly this situation corresponded to Cohen's observations (1976), though in a modernized setting. I include this discussion here because it is important not to be misled by injudicious assertions of "modernization".

Gender Relations

> Those interested in women and gender must look at the gender ideology of the Chinese family and state [which] have always been important religious institutions in China (Levering, 1994: 224).

Throughout Chinese history, the kinship system was central to the defining of the roles and power of women and men (Furth, 1999: 7). Several studies of Chinese women in the context of kinship, history, philosophy and religion (including Buddhism) have shown the propagated *mainstream* role for a woman to have principally been that of a mother and wife.[7] Based as it was on hierarchy, Confucian texts imagined a woman as subject to "three obediences": to her father during childhood, her husband during marriage and to her son after her husband's death (Eberhard, 1967: 117; Tsung, 1978: 9). While this dictum echoes a consistent tendency in Chinese family history, and was still observed by anthropologists during the 1970s in Taiwan, it disregards alternative roles for women, and more significantly, the power exerted by women over their daughters-in-law, sometimes over their husbands, and in particular, sons. Wolf, for example, believed the official male-centered and visible power structure to be subverted by an informal, rather invisible bond between the mother and son, an emotional bond Wolf termed the "uterine family" (Wolf, 1972: 32-37). Precisely this bond, argues Lu (1991: 30), still provides women with authority and power, a power that is largely rooted in women's control over their children.

This power is closely tied to the pronatalist chorus of Confucianism, where the most unfilial act was the failure to produce descendants – sons in particular. This factor was crucial for survival in old age, but also for emotional and spiritual security as traditional ancestor worship was an obligation passed down through the patriline (Hsieh and Chuang, 1985). Ancestor worship, male-centered but executed by women, has declined (Reed, 1994: 226), yet son preference, as Chuang (1985: 159), Moskowitz (2001) and Tsung (1978: 14)

[7] See Cole, 1998: 35; Ebrey, 2003; Guisso, 1981: 48; Harrell, 1986: 109; Huang and Weller, 1998: 382.

have shown, remains unabated. This surviving preference for sons may reflect an enduring ambivalent attitude toward women in Taiwanese society, or it might be uncontested due to the heavier filial burden placed on sons, presumably due to patrilineal structures.

Focusing primarily on the negative aspects patriarchy creates for its female members obscures the disadvantages and pressures imposed on men. Tang observes the legal code to assert the equality of the sexes, but social practice as complying largely with traditional norms; in this instance, inheritance practices. By law, women are entitled to inherit on an equal basis, but "daughters yield to pressures of parental authority and the desire to maintain good relations with their brothers" (Tang, 1985: 62, 68). This, she sees as a sign of inequality. However, Tang does not contemplate that even today, the burden of parental support is much heavier on sons than on daughters, which might account for the persistence of traditional inheritance customs. The same *may* apply to son preference, for the majority of wage earners are not only male; they also earn proportionally more than women (details below). Hence, parents are possibly less likely to trust their future support into the hands of daughters. In this way, structural inequalities and gendered attitudes enforce each other.

The pressures on men might, due to decreasing birth rates, weigh heavier than on women, a fact reflected in changing models of masculine hegemony, such as hyper-masculinity, and in the numerical predominance of nuns. Several male friends argued that they couldn't be ordained because they have to support their aging parents. In the past, women were not expected to support their parents financially, although they did support their in-laws through unpaid labor. The erosion of traditional patterns with regard to residence and marriage might therefore work to the advantage of many women. "Almost half" of Taiwan's female population is in the workforce, and much of the literature stressed

that primarily "unmarried women" work, suggesting the persistence of traditional patterns in the workforce.

Cohen observed in the 1970s that conjugal and complex families were characterized by male dominance – little economic freedom for women was the norm (Cohen, 1976: 91). Now, increasing – despite unequal – employment opportunities and the move toward nuclear families are seen as giving women more independence (Davison and Reed, 1998: 168; Farris, 1994; Kung, 1981: 210). However, this mutes the infamous double burden on working women. In Taiwan, employed women spend fives times as much time on housekeeping than men.[8] Hence even though women have entered the workforce, gender roles still adhere to traditional norms which assert women's domestic responsibility. Furthermore, even though women now have the right to work "outside", there is said to be a limited demand for skilled female employees (Kung, 1981: 210) – "Taiwan Women Web" emphasizes how 70% of housewives are qualified to work, and how the percentage of women in managerial, white collar and government positions is tremendously small. The web page also states that women's salary is on average 71.6% of that of men's salary. While the participation rate for men in the workforce was 86.37%, it has only been approximately 45% for women since the 1980s. Similarly, Chern points to the marginalization of women in the labor force, an aspect I also noted in the field.

In short, "[in Taiwan] women's subordination within the traditional family is the norm" (Chern, 2000: 113), a norm which is said to be primarily passed down through the education system (Reed, 1994: 225), albeit equally emphasized by the law. According to "Taiwan Women Web", family law regulates that "the wife has to live with her husband, the children are given the father's family name, the father has the final decision on disciplining

[8] "Taiwan Women Web" (The Frontier Foundation): "The Report on Women's Status in Taiwan" and related papers, online, http://taiwan.yam.org.tw/womenweb/st/98e/e_status.htm, 1998 [Accessed: 20.09.2003].

children, the husband has the right to manage all property in the marriage, and can override any of his wife's decisions."[9] Further, in the section on politics, the writers conclude on page one: "Traditional gender stereotypes still rule. 'Housewife' is regarded as women's primary role such that they are expected to take care of their family even when they have a job. The social values, the educational system, and the economic policies of our society don't encourage and support women".[10] And so, although the general situation of women in Taiwanese society has changed, it remains shaped by traditional forces. Acceptable ideals of womanhood still largely conform to traditional Confucian values.

The way in which women's roles have been tied to their maternal role is reflected in the suspicion about nuns who chose not to conform to such expectations (Chern, 2000: 229), as well as other marginalized groups (Tsung, 1978). During the Kuomintang rule, "role model mothers were selected on Mother's Day on the basis of how many children they have raised and what socially recognized achievements their children have made so that a maternal image of women [was] glorified" (Lu, 1994: 296). Likewise, Tsung observed that what she considers "modern" women were expected to conform to the model of the good wife and mother (Tsung, 1978: 12, 353), depicting Taiwanese ideas of femininity as largely adhering to maternal ideals.

Although traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity have somewhat changed, the conception of the public *versus* the domestic as separate realms for men and women respectively, remains widespread. Reed, for instance, stresses that the roles for women and men continue to follow the Confucian dichotomy "outside/inside", where women's responsibilities are tied to the domestic realm (Reed, 1994: 238; also Sung, 1981: 66). Chinese women are still required to be benevolent and caring, chaste, modest and

[9] http://taiwan.yam.org.tw/womenweb/st/98e/e_law.htm, 1998, page one [Accessed: 20.09. 2003].
[10] http://taiwan.yam.org.tw/womenweb/st/98e/e_politics.htm, 1998, page one [Accessed: 20.09. 2003].

submissive; that is, impeccable in their adherence to maternal models (Guisso, 1981: 50, 59; Lu, 1991: 35, 51-52). These models are passed down in education – in textbooks, as "Taiwan Women Web" observes. Moskowitz posits whilst women are expected to be care givers, men have to "work hard to provide financial support" (Moskowitz, 2001: 27).

While women are required to be chaste wives, men have free reign when it comes to extra-marital affairs (Tang, 1985: 68). This male fantasy negates the universality of the "chaste wife", since some women must cheat on their husbands. Unmarried women alone can hardly satisfy all extra-marital liaisons in a society that still condemns pre-marital sex. Hence while femininity is still tied to notions of chastity, hegemonic masculinity is not only characterized by the ability to support the family, but also by sexual promiscuity, strength and emotional control – notably, Moskowitz (2001: 29, 32) describes prevailing images of men as self-serving and self-oriented. In summary,

> Taiwanese society is still permeated with patriarchal Chinese traditions which prescribe women's roles *and* the roles of men with which they must deal. As the foundation of Chinese social philosophy, Confucian values cannot be avoided. Confucianism permeates the legal code and the education system. Confucianism defines the ideal family and the roles of its members. Whereas women are free to accept or reject other religious traditions, they must in some way come to terms with dominating Confucian values (Reed, 1994: 241; emphasis mine).

While "frenzied" modernization and other trends have changed Taiwanese society and concomitantly, gender relations, Confucian values nonetheless prevail: "Men's power to oppress women is a recognized part of the social system" (Harrell, 1986: 114). Hence while Chuang (1985: 160) portrays women during the 1980s as fairly self-determined and independent, Lu (1994: 300) explores in great detail her feminist struggles in a patriarchal world. In brief, the above data compellingly suggests the co-existence and even interpretation of "modernity" and "tradition". Similarly, although changes in the construction of models of masculinity and femininity can be identified, certain traditional paradigms for both prevail.

Buddhism: A Brief History

Prince Siddhartha is said to have attained Buddhahood under the Bodhi-tree in Bodh-Gayā six years after he had renounced worldly life during the fifth century BCE. From that time onwards, he was known as the Buddha, the "Awakened One". His disciples were known as the "sangha". The Buddha taught for some fifty years. His teachings, the "Dharma", were not committed to writing until several hundred of years after his passing away (Nattier, 1991: 33).

Buddhist scriptures are certainly the most extensive collection of discourses in any religious tradition. This very voluminosity poses many unsolved questions. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the Buddha's teachings were not recorded in his native language. Instead, the first corpus of teachings was recorded in Pāli, and the second corpus in Sanskrit. While Hīnayāna ("Lesser Vehicle")[11] Buddhists today consider only Pāli scriptures as authentic teachings of the Buddha, Mahāyāna ("Greater Vehicle") Buddhists stress scriptures recorded in Sanskrit. Based on the earlier written transmission of the Pāli texts, adherents of Hīnayāna schools and historians believe Mahāyāna scriptures to represent later forms of Buddhism.[12] Moreover, the Mahāyāna emphasis on the Bodhisattva ideal and teachings on compassion are seen as testimony to their being a later form of Buddhism. The latest stratum of Buddhism, from the perspective of historians, is Vajrayāna Buddhism, or Tantric Buddhism.

Adherents of Buddhist schools often denounce forms of Buddhism which are assumed to be later than theirs. In contrast to linear historical theories, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhists believe the Buddha to have given different teachings to different

[11] I refer to Hīnayāna rather than Theravāda not to be demeaning, but because the Theravāda is a school in its own right (see Nattier, 1991: 31).

[12] For an outstanding scholarly discussion regarding Buddhism and history see Nattier, 1991. For a critique of Western historical scholarship applied to Buddhism see Faure, 2003 and Corless, 1989, who is criticized by Nattier (1991: 133ff).

people throughout his life according to their individual predisposition, and that some teachings were transmitted secretly, or hidden until the right time for their exposure. Such views contain mythical elements, hence they are usually discounted by historians.

When Buddhism spread throughout Asia, it adapted to the cultures and customs of various societies. Today, Buddhism is practiced in its Southeast Asian form, or Hīnayāna, in Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Burma, and in its East Asian form, or Mahāyāna, in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, and Northern form, or Vajrayāna, in Tibet, Nepal, India, Mongolia and Central Asia.[13] Vajrayāna Buddhism was also transmitted to China and Japan where Chinese/Japanese strands developed. Even though Buddhism is conceptualized in this framework, beliefs, interpretations and practices vary significantly in different countries. Yet, certain core teachings and practices pervade all schools.

The diversity, or pluralism so characteristic of Buddhism in general also characterizes Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism. A number of Buddhist schools developed in China, most of which disappeared due to persecutions during the Tang dynasty (Shih, 1992: 2). The four main surviving schools still prominent today are Pure Land 淨土, Chan 禪 (Jap. Zen), *Tiantai* 天台, and *Huayan* 華嚴 Buddhism. The most commonly practiced form today appears to be Pure Land Buddhism, but even within this school, views diverge as to whether the "Pure Land" is a concrete place similar to the Christian paradise, or whether it is a state of mind (Jones, 1999: 118). Welch (1967) provided an initial survey of Chinese Buddhist practice, and Shih (1992) discusses in detail the interaction of the two most prevalent Chinese Buddhist schools, Pure Land and Chan, which she believes to have survived the Tang persecutions due to their iconoclastic character. However, China was not the only place where Buddhism experienced persecution. In India, Buddhism was practically eradicated during the Muslim invasions from the tenth century onwards.

[13] Most Buddhist schools have recently also been transmitted to many non-Asian countries.

During the Muslim conquest, countless Buddhist universities, monasteries, monuments, and artworks were destroyed. So were many Buddhist scriptures. Even so, during the course of Buddhism's transmission to South East Asia, most Buddhist scriptures had been translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and other Asian languages such as Mongolian. Hence although many scriptures are now lost, the Tibetan and Chinese versions still contain most sūtras. Nevertheless, research on Buddhism is greatly hampered by the loss of many Sanskrit scriptures. Comparative research of the Sanskrit and Chinese or Tibetan recensions is in its infancy, but there is no doubt that not every work in Chinese Buddhism originated as an Indian sūtra.[14]

Apocryphal Sūtras

In the process of translating Buddhist scriptures from Indic languages into Chinese, passages and concepts slipped into Chinese sūtras that are virtually absent in their Indian versions. Moreover, some "sūtras" are clearly Chinese creations. Research regarding this question is still in its early stages, but current scholarship has proof that many of the most treasured Chinese sūtras may not have been of Indian origin: "Many sūtras fundamental to Chinese Buddhist doctrinal outlook are, or are suspected to be indigenous Chinese compositions" (Kyoko, 1990: 30).

The authenticity of many Chinese sūtras was sometimes already questioned at the time of their first appearance (Ch'en, 1973; Kyoko, 1990), and during the 16th century, the problem of indigenous sūtras was widely discussed (Günzel, 1998: 13). While some Chinese texts do not quite correspond to the Indian version, others have never been recorded in Tibetan or Sanskrit. Their provenance is thus obscure.

[14] For a short introduction to Buddhism, see Skilton (1997), Zürcher (1959).

Among the three fundamental "Pure Land sūtras", the *Meditation Sūtra* 觀無量壽經 (*Guan Wuliangshoujing*) might be a Chinese commentary on both the short and long *Sukhāvatī Sūtras*, and various passages in the Chinese version of the long sūtra are said to be Confucian interpolations (Gómez, 1996: 128). The short and long *Sukhāvatī Sūtras* are among the most widely recited sūtras in Taiwan today – the recitation of the shorter one is included in the evening service of monastics. Secondly, since both sūtras are connected to Buddha Amitabhā, whose invocation is probably one of the most popular spiritual practices in Taiwan, they must be considered influential. Whilst these sūtras either contain Chinese interpolations, or do not correspond closely to the Indian version, they appear to be largely based on Sanskrit texts. In contrast, scholars have found that a number of Buddhist sūtras were composed on China's soil. And so, the authenticity of *Fanwangjing* 梵網經 (*Brahma-net Sūtra)* is currently being investigated. Scholars who are acquainted with both the Sanskrit and Chinese versions have noticed their evident difference (Groner, 1990: 253; Levering, 1989: 73).[15] Likewise, the provenance of the *Huayanjing* 華嚴經 (*Avatamska Sūtra*), the foundational text of *Huayan* Buddhism is obscure (Buswell, 1990).

Indigenous Chinese scriptures were often produced to satisfy the need for texts which stressed filial piety more than Indian sūtras (Ch'en, 1973: 36). Although filial sentiments can be observed in early epigraphy (Schopen, 1996), filial piety was much less emphasized in Indian Buddhism than it was in its Chinese form (Ch'en, 1964: 179ff; Cole, 1998: 1; Faure, 1998: 24; Jan, 1991: 31). Consequently, one of the most prominent themes in indigenous Chinese sūtras is filial piety, and closely connected to this topic, questions of reproduction and gender. Cole's study provides an initial attempt to analyze this change of emphasis during the transmission of Buddhism from India to China. In order to forge a close bond

[15] Meeting of Western scholars of Buddhism in Taiwan, Taipei, Sep. 2002. The scholars present pointed out that the two versions differ significantly, but not in what respect.

between mothers, sons and the Buddhist clergy, Cole argues, Chinese Buddhists devised new sūtras which increasingly stressed the necessity of filial piety and the inter-connectedness of mothers, sons and the clergy as *the* source of salvation from the burden of karma between mothers and sons (Cole, 1998: 227ff). Moreover, Chinese indigenous Buddhists sūtras represented women's lot in a progressively misogynistic way. Indeed, many apocryphal sūtras, or sūtras with Chinese interpolations, espouse views of the female that do not appear in Indian sūtras. One example is the *Lengyanjing* 楞嚴經 *(Śūramgama Sūtra)*, in which specific female bodily processes receive some attention – note that the authenticity of the *Śūramgama Sūtra* has been in discussion since its appearance in China.[16]

Probably the most ghastly illustration of this development is the *Xuepenjing* 血盆經 (*Blood Bowl Sūtra*), where women are said to be reborn in a blood pond of a particular hell because of their reproductive uterine liquids (discussed in detail in Chapter 5).[17] While no Indian Buddhist sūtra seems to advance views similar to those of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, another extremely popular sūtra in Taiwan also implies that women are subject to a particular hell due to their reproductive processes. Shi De claimed the *Dizangpusajing* 地藏菩薩經 *(Ksitigarbha-pranidhana Sūtra)* to embrace similar views – it describes a hell in which blood has to be drunk. Interestingly, this sūtra was included in the Tang catalogue albeit considered a "forgery" 僞經 *weijing*. The Foguangshan Dictionary (2001: 1601, 2321) states *expressis verbis* that it is an excellent example where folk beliefs are merged with Buddhist doctrines. Likewise, the CBETA dictionary lists it among "filial scriptures". And so, contemporary Buddhist dictionaries, which are freely available, single out certain scriptures

[16] *Combined Digital Dictionaries of Buddhism and East Asian Literary Terms*, henceforth CBETA, 2001. In contrast to the dictionary published by Foguangshan, the CBETA does not provide page numbers. This dictionary is also published online: http://www.cbeta.org.

[17] Xian (1994) believes this text to derive from Daoism (see also Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 2550).

as "forgeries",[18] demonstrating how awareness about their authenticity is not confined to Western scholars. On the contrary, this movement of "purification" harks back to Ven. Taixü 太虛 and Ven. Yinshun 印順, arguably the two most significant contributors to modern Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism (Jones, 1999: 125). The works of Ven. Yinshun are used in current Buddhist literature and education, thus his views are tremendously influential. Moreover, many respondents referred to his writings. Therefore awareness prevails both among the monastics and informed laypeople that Chinese Buddhism diverges in various ways from Indian Buddhism.

And *yet* indigenous Chinese scriptures remain widespread. A case in point is the *Dizangpusajing*. Even though considered with ambivalence, it is nevertheless frequently printed and commented upon in Taiwan. The Buddhist Monthly *Ciyun* 慈雲 (第三十一卷第二期, 31.08.2002: 77-78) contains a list of printed sūtras for free distribution. The *Dizangpusajing* is the single most distributed work with four entries, testifying to its current popularity. So, authenticity alone does not account for the prevalence of certain scriptures, as Levering (1989) elaborates. Rather, a text that may well be known to be apocryphal might be accepted *because* it is compatible with Chinese culture – precisely because it was created/shaped by Chinese culture. This comes particularly to light in the Chinese *父母恩重難報經* (*Fumuenzhong nanbaojing*), the *Sūtra [Explaining that] the Kindness of one's Parents is Profound and Difficult to Repay*. Although this sūtra has long been established as a Chinese creation (Ch'en, 1973: 36; Grant, 1994: 60; Jan, 1991: 31; Foguangshan, 2001: 1503), it is still published and disseminated in Taiwanese temples and monasteries today. Ven. Cheng-yen published a commentary on this text in 1999. Firstly, this publishing of a commentary by an acknowledged authority indicates its prevailing popularity among Buddhists in Taiwan, which my fieldwork corroborates. Secondly, it demonstrates that some

[18] The CBETA CD is free of charge. So is the online Buddhist dictionary and digital version of the *Tripitaka*.

people might be either unaware of its Chinese provenance, or simply ignore this factor. Hence, an indigenous Chinese scripture is accepted if deemed expedient, or appropriate.

Yü quotes Makita with regard to Buddhist apocryphal texts, enumerating six different kinds of indigenous Chinese scriptures: "promoting the interest of the ruling authority, criticizing politics, trying to reconcile Buddhism with Chinese traditional thought/comparing the two, proselytizing, being linked with specific names, and promising cures and blessings" (Yü, 2001a: 101). The texts discussed above all belong to the third class of apocryphal sūtras. Their main concern is, as stated above, filial piety, but many of them also contain passages that depict women in a derogatory way. Needless to say then, some of the most popular sūtras in Taiwan, several of which are considered apocryphal, espouse views of the female that are compatible with traditional Chinese attitudes toward women. Irrefutable evidence is lacking, but current data suggests the images of women and female embodiment in Buddhist texts to have changed significantly in the hands of Chinese redactors, along with the increasing emphasis on filial piety.

Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhism

The creation of indigenous Chinese Buddhist scriptures was possible because Buddhism, as observed above, has never been a cohesive school, nor was Buddhism as a whole controlled by a central authority. Even today, Buddhism is transformed, as many of its teachings are adapted to new situations. Further, certain indigenous religions adapted large parts of Buddhist writings and concepts without considering themselves Buddhist.

Scholars of religious studies and ethnologists have been debating methods to distinguish between Buddhism and other religious groups. While some argue that any person, or group that claims to be Buddhist must be considered as such, others oppose such an approach. It is indeed difficult to draw the line when it comes to distinguishing

Buddhism from other groups, or Buddhists from adherents of popular religion. In this thesis, those who expressly regard themselves as Buddhists are considered Buddhists, rather than using scholarly, or clerical judgment as to what a Buddhist is.[19]

Buddhism has influenced Chinese history and culture in various ways. Buddhism in Taiwan had 5.48 million adherents in November 2002; that is, almost 25% of the population consider themselves Buddhist, and so Buddhism is an integral part of Taiwanese society. [20] However, although its study is imperative for an understanding of Taiwan, Western scholars have largely neglected this subject. While Daoism and Taiwanese popular religion attracted Western scholars as early as the 1960s (Jordan and Overmyer, 1986; Schipper, 1993), Buddhism in Taiwan remained on the fringe of Western scholars' interest until recently. But Jones' comprehensive study of Taiwanese Buddhism (1999) and other related studies (Günzel, 1994; 1998; Jones 1997; Huang & Weller, 1998), as well as several Masters and PhD projects and a number of unpublished papers reflect an increasing interest in Taiwanese Buddhism.

Buddhism was practiced in a rather disorganized form until the Japanese occupation and the takeover by the Kuomintang (Weller, 1999: 345). As per Chen, during the Japanese period, most people were not interested in Buddhism. However, due to the Japanese emphasis on Guanyin worship, and policies that aimed at strengthening Japanese Buddhism and curtailing popular religious activity, many folk temples were adorned with Buddhist statues, primarily those of Guanyin. This led to an increase in Guanyin worship. Nevertheless, the aim of placing Buddhist statues in folk temples by adherents of popular

[19] The question of heterodoxy and orthodoxy is widely discussed among scholars of Chinese religion. It is not a central issue in this thesis, thus I only allude to this problem. Jones (1997) discusses in detail the different levels of Buddhist commitment as evidenced by the number and sort of vows practitioners take. Most of my interlocutors had received refuge vows (details below), a few had taken Bodhisattva, and very few observed lay vows. By contrast, only 10% of the respondents to the questionnaire had not received any form of vows. Thus they did not merely consider themselves Buddhist, but 90% of the respondents had made a certain commitment to Buddhism.

[20] As per the *Republic of China Yearbook*.

religion was not to make it more Buddhist. Instead, this hybridization occurred so as to conceal the real affiliation and practices of the respective temple. The perceived degeneration of Buddhism in Taiwan noted by monks from Mainland China was therefore *not* so much a hybridization of Buddhism, but of popular religion! This explains the erstwhile confusion regarding Taiwanese Buddhism during the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars noted the syncretistic tendency of Taiwanese religion. During the Japanese period, popular religion is said to have served as an emblem for Taiwanese cultural identity *versus* Japanese imperialism, along with Japanese Buddhism (Chen, 1995: 5, 98, 158, 161, 174). This cultural identification with popular religion remains identifiable today (Chen, 1995: 179),[21] but the impact of the Japanese period on Taiwanese Buddhism has been considered rather minimal due to the subsequent restructuring of Buddhism.

Following the takeover by the Nationalist government, the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (henceforth BAROC) was relocated to Taiwan. This entailed a large influx of Mainland Chinese monks who strongly influenced Buddhism in Taiwan (Jones, 1999: xxii). Only then did *institutionalized* Buddhism in Taiwan begin to flourish. Because Chinese monks perceived the degeneration of Buddhism, they set out to re-organize Taiwanese temples and habits, and thereby diminished the previously pervasive influence of the laity (Jones, 1999: 114). Accordingly, Chinese Buddhism greatly shaped Buddhism in Taiwan, and even though Taiwanese Buddhism cannot be fully equated with Chinese Buddhism, it is fair to argue that it has been shaped by Chinese Buddhism.[22] Nevertheless,

[21] Consult for example the *Republic in China Yearbook*, where "Taiwanese culture" is almost exclusively equated with popular religion and indigenous Taiwanese (not Han-Chinese).

[22] In this thesis, I focus on the place "Taiwan" in the discussion of Buddhism, thus I use the term "Taiwanese Buddhism". I thereby do not wish to imply that Buddhism in Taiwan is specifically "Taiwanese" in doctrine. When it comes to doctrinal matters, Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism appear to be almost interchangeable, except for recent developments in Taiwan, such as the strong emphasis on social welfare. A comparison between contemporary Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese Buddhism remains to be written – for obvious reasons. Buddhism in Mainland China was suppressed for almost fifty years and has only recently begun to recover. (Note though that many interlocutors considered Buddhism in Taiwan the future cradle for the

certain subsequent developments, some of which are discussed in Chapter Three, gave Buddhism a specific Taiwanese flavor (Jones, 1999: xvi, xxii, 219, 225 n.3). Yet, doctrinally, Buddhism in Taiwan is essentially Mahāyānist.

Today, religion – Buddhism in particular – is burgeoning in Taiwan: a "Buddhist Renaissance", to quote DeVido (2000).[23] Thousands of folk temples and 4037 Buddhist temples and monasteries are spread across the Taiwanese countryside and cities. Some house merely one monastic, while others are home to thousands. At least three TV channels broadcast Buddhist news, soap operas, documentaries and movies, offer lectures on Buddhist topics, sūtras, and so on, 24 hours per day. Many temples publish their own monthly or weekly journal, in addition to daily, monthly Buddhist newspapers of larger groups such as Foguangshan 佛光山. There are 28 Buddhist publishing houses. Sūtras, commentaries, lectures, tapes and CDs are offered free of charge in temples, and an even greater variety can be purchased in numerous Buddhist shops. Temples offer short retreats, sūtra chanting events, practices of reciting the Buddha's name, meditation lessons, and classes on various topics such as Buddhist philosophy, calligraphy, flower arrangement, vegetarian cooking *ad infinitum* on a weekly and monthly basis. A number of Buddhist seminaries (39) have been established for laypeople and monastics, as well as 5 Buddhist Universities, 64 institutions for "proselytizing", and 118 libraries. Countless Buddhist charitable enterprises, such as hospitals, kindergartens, and so on provide social services for the needy.[24] In brief, there is almost nothing Buddhism does not offer in Taiwan today,

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revival of Buddhism on the Mainland.) Conversely, although Japanese and Taiwanese scholars have been studying Taiwanese Buddhism for several decades, this interest by Western academics is fairly recent. Furthermore, the pluralistic and burgeoning character of Buddhism in Taiwan hampers its study rather than facilitating it. In short, I refer to "Taiwanese Buddhism" instead of "Buddhism in Taiwan" mainly for convenience. Matters of ethnicity or doctrine are not implied. It is solely a term designating the *location* of the research. While many observations *may* apply to Chinese Buddhism as a whole, since my research *was* conducted in Taiwan, I cannot warrant that the conclusions I draw apply to "Chinese Buddhism" in general.

[23] For a discussion of this trend, see Jordan, 1994.

[24] These numbers are based on the online *Republic of China Yearbook* [Accessed Sep. 2003].

including wonder-healers, clairvoyants, mystics, shamans, and so forth. Thus, contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan truly proffers an almost inexhaustible choice for the individual practitioner or seeker, but also for the professional religious person, or the monastic. While three decades ago, monastic life was fairly constricted by traditional forces (Tsung, 1978), monastics today have a greater freedom of choice: "The Buddhist [ordained] sangha in Taiwan today is probably more dedicated and educated than at any other time or place in Chinese history" (Jordan, 1994: 146). They need not just be meditators, or religious specialists. They can also choose to provide social services.[25]

Buddhism in Taiwan has been flourishing for several reasons. The lifting of martial law in 1987, and the revision of government policies regarding the institution of civic groups gave people the right to freely establish religious associations. Jones posits that these new policies were important for Buddhism's growth, because prior to 1989, Buddhism was under tight state control via the BAROC, at that time the only legitimate and powerful national Buddhist organization. These two constitutional changes permitted the unrestrained development of religious groups (Jones, 1999: 181ff). Secondly, the determination and effort of a large number of monastics to increase the quality of the ordained sangha through education changed the status of monastics in general, significantly enhancing the image of Buddhism in Taiwan society (Shih, 1995: 172).[26] Likewise, the promotion of a human-centered interpretation of Buddhism which entails extensive charity work, and the concomitant secularization and simplification of Buddhist teachings contributed significantly to the prospering of Buddhism,[27] as did methods of

[25] Throughout Asia, Buddhism is said to "resurface in secular forms" (Barnes, 1994: 135), a phenomenon that goes back to the late 19th/early 20th century. See Goldfuss (2001; reviewed in Yeshe, 2003c), who discusses Western influence on Chinese Buddhist reform movements in detail.

[26] See Chern (2000) for a discussion of the changing images of nuns in the media, which clearly reflects a transformation of attitudes toward the ordained sangha.

[27] The biggest associations illustrating this argument are Tzu-chi and Foguangshan. Ven. Cheng-yen's interpretation of the *Pāramitās*, for example, is an excellent testimony to the secularization, or evangelization

mass-mobilization (DeVido, 2000). Lastly, the economic boom experienced until the late 1990s allowed for the pecuniary support of Buddhist enterprises (Huang & Weller, 1998). Thus, Huang and Weller believe that the efflorescence of Buddhism is mainly linked to "modernization", to the perceived decline of morals and communal values with increasing prosperity. Accordingly, they claim that modernization and the decline of morals are considered to be threats to the ethical integrity of Taiwanese society, and therefore deem the flourishing of Buddhist groups such as Tzu-chi and the Taiwanese economic boom to be interdependent (Huang & Weller, 1998: 389, 391). Similarly, Davison and Reed (1998: 31) infer that the economic boom and increased religious activity can be correlated.[28]

Many scholars stress the importance of economic factors for the success of religious groups, yet the economic miracle alone was certainly not the only factor contributing to the thriving of Buddhism. Socially engaged Buddhism – albeit not unique, yet pervasive in Taiwan (Eppsteiner, 1988; Kraft, 1988) – requires substantial pecuniary support. Still, this fairly recent form of Buddhism can only thrive in societies which do not provide extensive in social services and social security.[29] The rapid and massive expansion of Tzu-chi, which engages in national and international missions,[30] can certainly be attributed to the economic boom – as much as to the lack of a comprehensive social security system.

Furthermore, religious activity was already an important constituent of Taiwanese culture prior to the relocation of Buddhist monastics from Mainland China. Like humans elsewhere, Taiwanese quite possibly practice religion to give meaning to their lives and provide explanations for apparently insoluble questions. Consequently "modernity" and the "decline of values" do not fully explain the apparent intensification of religious practice.

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of Buddhism in Taiwan, discussed in detail in the context of Tzu-chi in Chapter Three.

[28] Weller (1987: 146) emphasizes that Buddhism is generally attractive because it stresses equality.

[29] Perhaps for this reason, 'socially engaged Buddhism' is less successful in many Western countries.

[30] Such as disaster relief, first aid, health care and so on.

Practitioners today may simply justify their religious beliefs and practices differently.

Modernity did, however, facilitate the spread of most religious groups, especially in Taiwan. Many interlocutors argued that certain Buddhist groups are remarkably successful because they have been able to consummately utilize the media, and thus to mobilize large numbers of people. Günzel, for instance, points to the skilled use of the media as crucial, further arguing a number of factors to determine the success of a monastery, or Buddhist organization. Firstly, he points to the importance of voluntary helpers who spend a considerable amount of their time, energy and resources in monasteries, and professional fundraisers, mainly middle-aged women, as indispensable supporters. Secondly, he considers the commercialization of Buddhist doctrine, also called secularization, as affecting the success of Buddhist groups. Thirdly, he believes that the adaptability of the Buddhist clergy to local customs, in accordance with economic and social changes, enabled Buddhism to profit from the economic miracle (Günzel, 1998: 120-121, 124).

However, such arguments ignore important historical factors that go back to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. When China was confronted with Western societies and ideas, several Chinese intellectuals and clerics claimed Buddhism as part of their national heritage – as opposed to Confucianism, which was often blamed for many of China's problems. The inauguration of the BAROC and its close connection to the state illustrates this tendency. Goldfuss (2001) discusses in detail the widespread Orientalist glorification of Buddhism in the West, and the way in which Buddhism in China was thereupon reinterpreted into a "scientistic" framework – in reaction to Western views. The trend of demystifying and reinterpreting Buddhism as "scientistic", and at the same time claiming this "superior" down-to-earth Buddhism – as opposed to the previous allegedly "superstitious" folk Buddhism – as part of the Chinese (and now Taiwanese) cultural

heritage was a movement instigated more than a century ago.[31] It remains a ubiquitous tendency today. However, this additional note on more historical influences on the current success of Buddhism does not eclipse arguments already noted.

In brief, scholars propose a number of different reasons for the recent efflorescence of Buddhism in Taiwan. Taken alone, single arguments do not adequately explain the intensity of religious activity in Taiwan. More likely, a whole range of factors led to the intensification of religious activity, if it is more intense at all. The current emphasis on religion may simply be a renewal, or transformation of religious practice in a "modern" context, framed as it is by commercialization and an extensive use of the mass media. Religious activity, or spiritual practice might simply be more performative and less personal than in the past. Similar to other aspects in the age of technology, religion has perhaps simply been affected by the popularization of personal lives and experiences as in the age of the mass media, knowledge and personal stories are less frequently passed down on a personal basis, but through literature and the media. In short, the apparent "intensification" of religious activity is closely entwined with (and mirrors) changes in Taiwan society.

In tandem with the expansion of Buddhism, the choices of Buddhist practice have also increased. Many interlocutors stated the main practices today, as in the past, to consist of the recitation of Buddha Amitabhā's name (Jones, 1999: 115). They claimed that this practice prevails today because as recently as during the 20th century, one layperson attained awakening through this method. Still, Ch'en (1964: 460) attributes this predominance to the influence of Ven. Yinguang 印光. Further, the recitation of sūtras, mantras and *dharanis* remains widespread. Less frequent appears to be the practice of formal meditation. Most interlocutors complained that they would like to meditate but are unable to find the time, or

[31] Note that this was a pan-Asian movement, for details see Goldfuss (2001).

a conducive environment to do so.[32]

Buddhist monastics recite the morning and evening liturgy, as well as a third session that consists of invocations and offering praises before lunch. During the rest of the day, depending on the focus of the respective temple, monastics may engage in their personal contemplative practices, social work, and/or other routine tasks at the temple that are considered part of their spiritual cultivation.[33] Similarly, many devout laypeople also engage in the morning and evening service. While during interviews, respondents rarely referred to the recitation of Amitabhā's name, and mainly claimed to recite sūtras, the overwhelming majority of respondents of the questionnaire considered themselves to be Pure Land Buddhists, which suggests the predominance of Pure Land Buddhism to remain unabated.

Syncretism

To understand Taiwanese Buddhism one needs to appreciate Chinese, or Taiwanese religiosity. Chinese religious activity is syncretistic, combining elements of ancestor worship, and popular religious elements with Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Outsiders often find themselves at a loss trying to differentiate between these traditions. So do Taiwanese. This is not just a contemporary phenomenon, for throughout Chinese history, these elements have interacted, struggled for supremacy and have adopted ideas from each other (Ch'en, 1964: 62ff; Zürcher, 1980 for example). And so, when considering Taiwanese Buddhism, the syncretistic, or inclusive character of Taiwanese religion has to be acknowledged. The long-held notion that "three religions are one" is still widespread in Taiwan, and is by no means restricted to popular religion (Shih, 1992: 10).[34]

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[32] Note that much of the fieldwork was done in Taipei city, which has a high level of noise pollution at almost all times.

[33] For details see Levering, 1989.

[34] An entire discipline has developed under the aegis of the study of Chinese religion regarding this question. The literature on syncretism is too vast to be reviewed here, a topic that would require a thesis by itself. An

Although syncretism is a distinctive characteristic of religion and Buddhism in Taiwan, it appears that institutionalized Buddhism has been trying to distinguish itself from popular religion, folk Buddhism and other religious groups by stating that once one has taken refuge in the Triple Gem, which could be described as Buddhist baptism, people should only seek refuge therein, and not in other religions (Günzel, 1998: 100; Jones, 1997). Nevertheless, many Buddhists continue to pray to worldly gods, do "*baibai*", the Taiwanese term for worship, seek help from fortune-tellers and so on. Five observations illustrate this:

1. Ms Gao has been a devoted practitioner of *Huayan* Buddhism for several decades and was a very close disciple of one of the most important monks in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. She moves into a new flat where a particular spirit resides who disturbs her spiritual practice. Once she worships the spirit, it no longer harasses her.[35]

2. Ms Shu is an adherent of Tibetan Buddhism. During an excursion with a group of Tibetan monks and Taiwanese lay Buddhists, she and various other ladies worship at two popular religious temples. In the evening, she tells me that she worships virtually everything. Interestingly, a very wealthy businessman who is part of the group and has been a Buddhist for many years (having received extensive training in Buddhist philosophy) donates NT$100 (AUS$6) to (the wealth god of) the local temple. No Taiwanese seems to be surprised by his act. Only the Tibetan monks leave the temple in haste.[36]

3. Ms Chen states that she has not set up a Buddhist shrine because there is no space in her house. She then refers apologetically to the shrine of the local gods and ancestors on the second floor and argues that many people discard the 'old gods' after converting to Buddhism, but she feels that this is not right and cannot see any harm in worshiping them.[37] Approximately eighteen months later, she has set up a Buddhist shrine room, but the ancestors, she says, have to stay because ancestor worship is central to Chinese culture. Now, however, the ancestors have their own space.

4. In the house of Ms Shi in Tapei, by contrast, the Buddhist images share a shrine with Daoist and folk religious statues. The same can be observed in a Buddhist temple in Southern Taiwan, where the statue of Mazu, a Taiwanese heroine worshipped in popular religious temples, "lives" – this was the way the abbess put it.

important conceptual tool should nonetheless be mentioned here, Yang's differentiation between "diffuse" and "institutionalized" religion. See also the seminal works by Granet, 1975; Lopez, 1996; Peerenboom, 1988; Schipper, 1993; Sivin, 1978.

[35] Conversation, Taipei city, Sep. 2001.

[36] Conversation, Taipei county, Dec. 2001.

[37] Conversation, Taoyuan City, autumn 2001.

5. The fully ordained nun Shi Da bows down to the shrine of *Tudi Gong*,[38] the local earth spirit, when we go for a walk. Pointing out that during the ordination period the teachers said that the ordained sangha should not pay homage to worldly deities, she replies that she still has to pay respect to *Tudi Gong*, which she considers a sort of greeting. Similarly, Abbess B. ensured that offerings were made to a local protector.[39]

While early scholarship on Chinese religions attempted to differentiate between different Chinese traditions, these examples illustrate the inclusive character of Taiwanese religiosity. "Popular" practices and beliefs cannot be ignored when studying what has been suggested to be "pure Buddhism". "Pure Buddhism" only exists in idealized doctrine and treatise. Even at the very apex of the power structure, Buddhism adapts to local customs: During the Triple Platform Ordination, the ordinands were advised to pray to their ancestors, and specific rituals were conducted to allay obstacles.[40] Perhaps because leaving the worldly life is deemed as not fulfilling one's filial duties, and thus enraging one's ancestors,[41] this ritual was included.[42]

Although this study focuses on Taiwanese Buddhism, wider Chinese beliefs cannot be ignored. Chinese Buddhism itself has been syncretistic since it took root on Chinese soil on an institutionalized level, harking back to the combination of practices by Yong Ming (Shih, 1992: 89ff). Today's Buddhists may well attend meetings of other groups and contribute to their organizations without necessarily following their prescribed practices. A person who is ordained in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition might attend Vajrayāna initiations, seek health

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38 "*Tudi Gong* is the lowest level of place gods, conceived of as in charge of a specific, geographically defined jurisdiction" (Jordan, 1994: 153). For a detailed study, see Dell'Oro, 2002.

39 Taipei city, end of December 2002.

40 Weller (1987: 116) observed similar practices.

41 Although in Buddhist thinking, the ancestors would have been reborn already, one interlocutor claimed that no matter where and who they are, even if they have already been reborn, they will still receive the benefits of this ritual. In retrospect, this ritual seems to comfort the bad conscience of especially those who had to struggle for a long time before they could seek ordination. Only a few said that their parents agreed to their ordination, and their stories bespoke of painful experiences before their parents eventually agreed for them to be ordained. Note that parental permission for ordination is required by the *Vinaya*.

42 In this context, it is of interest to note that Weller deduces in his study of the Universal Salvation Rite in Taiwan, that Buddhists perform a Vajrayāna, and not a Mahāyāna version of the ritual (Weller, 1987: 121), but even the Mahāyāna version harks back to Vajrayāna influence in the Tang period (Shih, 1992: 113).

treatments from Buddhist lay practitioners, or ask for advice from fortune-tellers. During Vajrayāna gatherings in Taiwan in 1999 and 2001, a large number of Mahāyāna nuns and some monks were present. At this stage, it is impossible to ascertain whether the Mahāyāna believers who attend Vajrayāna events actually engage in Vajrayāna meditation practices, or whether they just attend initiations for the sake of receiving blessings. Correspondingly, persons who label themselves as Tzu-chi Buddhists might practice meditation, and Vajrayāna or Pure Land Buddhists might engage in social activism in addition to other practices of self-cultivation. Hence people might be affiliated to different groups without necessarily adhering strictly to their respective practices or dogmas.

Throughout this dissertation, "spiritual practice" or "religious cultivation" refers to what respondents themselves invoked, which primarily consisted of the combination of study, contemplation and meditation. The questionnaire, for example, clearly indicated that most respondents did not consider 作善事 "engaging in virtuous deeds" a form of spiritual practice. This, they deemed a form of acquiring merit.[43] And yet almost every big temple association practices its institutionalized form, which is best entitled secular, or humanistic Buddhism, 人間佛教 (*Renjian Fojiao*), focusing primarily on the world.[44]

Claiming Clairvoyance: Shentong

As stated above, more contemporary forms of Buddhism often distinguish themselves from their predecessors by stressing the "scientistic" and applicable nature. This rather materialistic focus on the secular world and the present in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism contradicts, or is perhaps a direct reaction to, a fairly widespread spiritual and

[43] A forthcoming study will discuss the results of the questionnaire, interviews and participant observation with regard to the practice of Buddhist in contemporary Taiwan. This topic requires more space than available here as the focus of this dissertation is with questions of gender.

[44] The interpretation of this secularized form of Buddhism differs from temple to temple, hence "*Our Renjian Fojiao*" was often invoked.

mystical obsession.[45]

A specific feature of the Taiwanese religious world is that it is imbued with things spiritual, or supernatural. Almost everybody *loved* to talk about their own, or others' spiritual experiences and abilities – in particular about those of their masters. Furthermore, many monks and nuns, as well as several laypeople, claimed to have "*shentong*" 神通. *Shentong* – possibly a translation of the Indian term *siddhi* – refers to supernatural powers such as clairvoyance, reading people's minds and comparable spiritual abilities. *Siddhis* ensue with meditative practice, hence *shentong* indicates the stage of religious accomplishment of the person concerned. Similarly, healing abilities, not eating, or only imbibing certain foodstuffs are seen to prove an individuals' spiritual potential. However, in conversations, the presumed ability to read hand-lines, faces, having visions and dreams of certain Bodhisattvas or deities, and the so-called heavenly eye, were specifically used by those who claimed spiritual status and disciples. Although the *Vinaya* prohibits monastics to talk about their spiritual experiences, and lying about them is a *Pārājika*, which entails the loss of one's status as a fully ordained monastic, it seems to be nonetheless a pastime many enjoy. Here, three examples illustrate the currency of this practice:

1. A male lay Buddhist who claims to have had visions of the Buddha when he was a child has his own center in Taipei city. He claims that because he was "blessed" by the Buddha, he has healing abilities and knows all sorts of meditation techniques – he can "see" non-embodied beings, knows anybody's level of practice by merely sitting down and meditating. When he invited me to Foguangshan with another Western nun, we met a group of Taiwanese, and he promptly told them about his abilities and promised to help them. He has a large group of followers.[46]

2. A particular abbess maintains to have had *shentong* for at least a decade. She holds that in our last life, we meditated together on the same mountain, which conveys the impression of her knowledge of previous lives. Later, however, it becomes clear that this is only a rhetorical device as she tells every newcomer the same story. She says she has had dreams of protector deities who prompted her to start the current project. She made predictions as to what would happen to us during the coming six months.

[45] See Harrell, 1986; Jordan and Overmyer, 1986; Moskowitz, 2001 for details.
[46] Dec 2002, Kaohsiung county.

These were purely suggestive, a method she used with many visitors. Her ominous predictions appeared to be a rhetorical device used to create rapport. One fine day, she howled a mantra and claimed that on that account, clouds formed in the sky in the shape of stupas.[47]

3. A prominent monk published a book with a chapter on "*my* enlightenment", elaborating on his spiritual experiences (emphasis mine).

This brief excursion into a realm largely beyond the contemporary means of scientific investigation illustrates the importance of supernatural abilities for the propagation of religious groups and individual practitioners, an observation in support of Moskowitz' (2001) findings. For the discussion of Chapters Six and Seven, it is essential to bear in mind that the worldview of many Buddhists in Taiwan is endowed with mystery.[48] And so, many Taiwanese interlocutors claimed to have seen ghosts, experienced other supernatural encounters, or at least knew of people who had done so.

Conclusion

This discussion amply demonstrates the coexistence of "tradition" and "modernity". A diversity of influences has shaped Taiwan, beginning with Chinese immigrants up to more recent influences from Japan and the West. Taiwanese society is complex – indeed, an enormous field of study in its own right. As questions of ethnicity, independence, gender and social equality remain contested, it is, although attempted in this chapter, impossible to provide an adequate survey of this diverse "country", a topic so complex that even the use of the word "country" itself is objectionable. However, all publications concur with respect to the tremendous social changes Taiwan experienced as a result of "frenzied modernization". Such can also be observed in Buddhism.

The burgeoning of Buddhism in Taiwan itself, its "purification" and secularization

[47] Nov 2002-Feb 2003.

[48] Moskowitz states that the belief in ghosts in Taiwan is "almost universal" (Moskowitz, 2001: 9). So does Weller (1987: 8, 70).

coupled with the persistence of traditional elements such as *shentong* illustrates the coexistence of traditional and modern idea(l)s in the same way as changing and yet persisting gender roles, as well as models of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Taiwan is a society in transition. In so far as religion is claimed to reflect society, Buddhism in Taiwan *ipso facto* mirrors its society. The following chapters illustrate that both, historical and current aspects, "traditional and modern" influences, shape contemporary Buddhist gender relations in Taiwan.

☙ *Chapter Two* ❧
Gender in Buddhism and Chinese Culture

Women in Buddhism

Women have been present in Buddhism since its inception in the form of lay supporters, mothers, wives, clerics and teachers.[1] In the story that recounts the Buddha's initial unwillingness to ordain his aunt and foster mother Mahāprajāpatī, he is said to have confirmed women's spiritual potential with regard to the attainment of nirvāna. Yet, he is also reputed to have requested women to accept eight additional rules, the *Gurudharmas*, and predicted the decline of the Dharma to occur five hundred years earlier due to the ordination of women.[2] Several scholars have called the historicity of this episode into question, and Nattier (1991: 28-33) provides evidence that this belief was put into writing between 340-200BCE.

And so, the initial and eventual ordination of Buddhist women planted the seed of a dilemma which pervaded the history of gender relations in Buddhism. Based on this story, Buddhists in most cultures acknowledged women's capacity to attain nirvāna (but not necessarily Buddhahood).[3] However, because the Buddha is reputed to have initially refused to ordain women, some voices in the Buddhist discourse claim women to be less capable of spiritual attainments. According to Sharma, for instance, Hīnayāna Buddhism

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[1] See the Bibliography for studies on women in Buddhism. The available literature is far too extensive to warrant a review here. However, the following monographs deserve attention: Cabeźon, 1992a; Faure, 2003; Gross, 1993; Horner 1930; 1961; Paul, 1985; Reyl, 1984; Tsomo, 1988.

[2] "If, Ānanda, women had not retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata, religion, Ānanda, would long endure; a thousand years would the good doctrine abide. But since, Ānanda, women have now retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata, not long, Ānanda, will religion endure; but five hundred years, Ānanda, will the doctrine abide" (*Vinaya, Cullavagga* X, 1, 6, translation by Warren, cited in Nattier, 1991: 28-29). "The Buddha goes on to make a number of unflattering analogies, comparing the effect on the sangha of the presence of women to that of mildew on a field of rice, or rust on a sugarcane plant" (Ibid.).

[3] Note that different levels of spiritual attainment distinguish different Buddhist schools. Often, these levels are also gender specific.

recognized women's potential to attain nirvāna – they could become Arhats, but Buddhahood was and is a male domain. If a woman was to attain Buddhahood (as opposed to the attainment of nirvāna), she had to be reborn as a man, a view she maintains to go back to Pāli scriptures (Sharma, 1978: 72ff, 77-78; see also Kajiyama, 1982: 53).

Since Buddhist discourse contains an enormous collection of writings, attitudes toward women vary greatly, and as Peach (2002) and Sponberg (1992) have discussed in detail, even within single sūtras.[4] Based on the theory of the historical evolution of Buddhism, scholars have advanced rather contradictory theories. Some hold that early Buddhism was more misogynist than later strands. Others claim that attitudes toward women were more egalitarian during the time of the Buddha, but that misogynist views of monk redactors slipped into later sūtras. Attitudes toward women changed in Indian culture, hence, they argue, Buddhism was concomitantly influenced. Writings by monk-scholars such as Śāntideva, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu and others provide ample evidence that later Buddhists did hold more sexist views of women. Although the writings of Śāntideva and others were not the words of the Buddha *per se*, they had a tremendous impact on Mahāyāna Buddhism. These texts are still part of the monastic curriculum today and are widely read, commented on, and lectured on, both in Taiwan and among Tibetan Buddhists. Thus their views must be considered influential.

It is quite likely that new ideas were inserted into Buddhist discourse (including sūtras) at a later point in time. However, since the different theories about women's changing status in Buddhism based on the hypothesis of a linear historical development are almost diametrically opposed to each other, they might be considered as speculative rather than factual. As Faure (2003: 2) claims, this debate is more a "distinction between optimists and

[4] Sponberg differentiates between "soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny and soteriological androgyny" (Sponberg, 1992: 8).

pessimists, or idealists and realists". Moreover, it is problematic to innocently accept claims that certain passages or concepts, which do not quite fit into the scholars' worldview of what might have been the 'true' teachings of the Buddha, are later interpolations.

Indeed, the interrelation between text and context seems more relevant. Mahāyāna Buddhism claims that due to the different propensities of sentient beings, the Buddha taught according to the situation. While a certain section of a sūtra may appear misogynist, it might have been a teaching for a particular audience, or even for an individual. Adherents generally claim sūtras to have been oral discourses of the Buddha, whereas scholars rather consider them textual literary creations. In either case, apparently misogynist representations of women were aimed at, or imparted to a specific readership, or audience – an audience, as Ueki (2001: 25) maintains, that was exclusively male, and celibate (even though today, as elaborated in Chapter Four, such stories are taught to mixed audiences). Perhaps, such negative representations of women were aimed at instilling renunciation in monks, particularly those who had difficulties transcending sexual urges (see Blackstone, 1998; Wilson 1995; 1996). Teaching in accordance with the predispositions of the audience was called *upāya* (skilful means). Since teachings were possibly made in specific contexts, statements regarding women should not be mistaken as definite.

The actual attitude of the Buddha vis-à-vis women cannot be discovered in retrospect. It is a rather secondary question for those who live Buddhist ways of life today. More important are questions of how texts were and are incorporated by Buddhist teachers and practitioners, as texts are always open to interpretation. How texts are interpreted and commented on varies across cultures, and between individuals. As Lopez writes, "a person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting" (Lopez, 1988: 65). Thus while certain passages might elaborate on the inherent defilement of women, every reader understands such views differently. Consequently, *current* interpretations of

historical texts are more crucial for the understanding of contemporary gender relations in Buddhism than their original intent. The present concern is therefore not *what* the Buddha's views of women were, but *how* Buddhist teachings were and are understood, and how they have been adopted to the cultural contexts where Buddhism was espoused. Hence a fundamental task is to consider practicing Buddhists – the purveyors of Buddhism – in the past and present, and to analyze how they structure their own interpretation of Buddhism in a gendered way.

Gender and Sexuality in the Vinaya

The *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* contains the vows and rules of ethical conduct – considered the very basis of spiritual training in most Buddhist discourse – of the Buddhist tradition and monastic rules transmitted to China. The vows and rules are subdivided into different levels. While the transgression of the vow of celibacy, for instance, leads to expulsion, not wearing one's robes properly is rather a "lapse". Most of the vows were established by the Buddha as a consequence of monastic misbehavior, often reported to the Buddha by lay patrons. Hence several scholars deem monastic vows a mechanism to distinguish the clergy from the laity, a way to establish boundaries that should not be transgressed lest the social body of the clergy be threatened. However, Buddhists in most traditions themselves would probably rather consider the observance of (monastic) discipline a form of spiritual training.

By virtue of prescribing analogous rules for monastics such as similar clothing, and a shaven head, prohibitions on growing a beard for monks and wearing feminine adornments for nuns, monastic rules reduce socially defined exterior gender markers. At the same time, by suggesting different rules for monks and nuns, those for the interaction between the two sexes in particular, the rules and vows in the *Vinaya* can be said to reinscribe gendered difference. Furthermore, a number of vows in the *Vinaya* are intimately connected with

bodily practice, with questions of sexuality, reproduction and gender distinction. Since the *Vinaya* is fundamental to ethical conduct and monastic life, and since monasticism influences Buddhism, monastic discipline as depicted in the *Vinaya* is contemplated here.

Because sexual desire is seen as quintessentially binding humans to the cycle of existence, monastic rules, first and foremost require men and women alike to renounce their sexuality.[5] Sexual contact with a partner of the *opposite* sex results in immediate expulsion from the sangha. However, not every sexual activity is a *Pārājika*, a "defeat". Specifically sexual activity with the *other sex* is deemed transgression of the most basic vow. Correspondingly, desirous physical contact of a *bhiksunī* (a fully ordained nun) and a man between 'the armpits and knees' is a *Pārājika* for the *bhiksunī*. Thus contact with the other sex is problematic while autoeroticism, and contact with a same-sex partner are deemed less serious offences. Nonetheless, a less serious but still a heavy transgression for monks is ejaculation. For women, three out of eight *Pārājikas* are concerned with relations with the other sex, while only one out of four of the monks' primary vows refer to sexual contact.[6] In the *Sanghāvaśesa*, the second category of vows, 38.5% of the vows for monks and 23.5% for nuns refer to sexuality, which confirms chastity as essential to the status of the clergy. Yet sexual continence is also important for the laity, as one of the five lay vows insists on abstaining from sexual misconduct, encouraging lay Buddhists to control their sexuality.

Abbess A. explained this discrepancy in the number and magnitude of the vows between the sexes with the contention that monks are unable to keep a regimen as strictly as nuns.[7] For nuns, sexual contact with men, male animals, or a male corpse is a *Pārājika*,

[5] The four *Pārājikas*, or "defeats" for men (women have four additional ones), leading to the expulsion from the ordained sangha, are: sexual contact with someone of the other sex, deliberate homicide, stealing, and lying about one's spiritual attainments.

[6] Two additional vows were claimed to protect the nuns (touching the body and making an appointment for a sexual rendezvous) during the ordination period.

[7] One abbess claims the Buddha to have established the vow of celibacy as a result of the transgressions by monks (Wu-yin, 2001; and 2000: 20, 23, 26).

while for monks, "it includes a woman, a female animal, as well as a female non-human, a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, another man, an insane person, a corpse" (Wu Yin, 2001: 150). The variety of possible sex objects that lead to expulsion from the order of monks is much wider than for nuns. It encompasses embodied and disembodied beings, while for nuns, only sexual activity with embodied beings of the opposite sex results in the expulsion from the monastic community. This variety of possible sexual partners is perhaps an indication for the perceived difficulty of the control of male sexual desire.[8]

Correspondingly, during a casual conversation in December 2002, Shi Xin posited that generally speaking, in Taiwan today, men are more likely to disrobe due to sexual desire[9] while nuns tend to disrobe because they are raped. When asked about further details, she exclaimed, "I shouldn't talk about these things. If our master finds out, she will get angry with me." Not everything can be said. The reaction vis-à-vis one nun who in 1999 had claimed to have been raped is similarly revealing. None of my interlocutors seemed to believe her. The abbess who instructed us during the ordination period referred to this incident, discounting all evidence and presented her as having lied – and, she continued, even if such an incident truly happened, the nun should have refrained from going to court. In this regard it seems noteworthy that Shi Xiao mentioned an incident where a number of nuns who had been group-raped thereupon committed suicide, as they believed they had committed a *Pārājika*. They left a note behind.[10] Since this information is purely based on statements by interlocutors, and not on archival evidence, these observations have to remain suggestive until further research reveals more.

Nevertheless, regarding rape, Wu Yin writes "[...] the strictness of the precept makes a

[8] Consider Faure: "All these rules suggest that the woman – lay or nun – remains an object of the desire for the monks. Possessed by an inclination to lust that is difficult to control, she becomes even more dangerous. The entire *Vinaya* seems to derive from this fundamental asymmetry between genders" (Faure, 1998: 88).
[9] Yikong Shi (2002) at the Sakyadhita conference posited the same.
[10] Conversation with Shi Xiao, Academia Sinica, Sep. 2002.

bhiksunī very conscientious. It helps prevent situations which sometimes occur in which a woman *semi-voluntarily receives* a man's *unwanted* advances while *half-heartedly protesting* his actions" (Wu Yin, 2001: 151; emphasis mine). This data illustrates how in contemporary Buddhist practice in Taiwan, as in so many societies, the rape-victim is judged as "accepting" sexual advances. In this way, the victim is held partly responsible for the rape.[11]

These examples evince how some members today, like those of the early Buddhist community, were and are struggling to control their sexuality, but the vows are weighed differently for the sexes. For instance, while autoeroticism is merely a *Pāyantika* (a lapse) for nuns, it entails suspension for monks. Why is homosexual intercourse for nuns only a "lapse", despite it being a sexual activity, but for monks a *Sanghāvaśesa*? Perhaps simply because the emission of semen is rather "messy"? Or, perhaps nuns engaged less frequently in homosexual sexual intercourse than monks? Or was homoeroticism not a *Pārājika* because it engages a partner of the *same* sex?

The *Vinaya* and my experience as a nun in Taiwan reveal that contact between two monastics from the same sex is not considered as problematic as contact with the other sex, be that in terms of living arrangements, physical, or casual contact. Faure argues similarly on the basis of archival data: "Homosexuality was tolerated because in as much as it clearly remained male and monastic, and did not call gender roles into question" (Faure, 1998: 280). The same applies to female homoeroticism. Powers suggested that throughout the *Vinaya*, homosexual relations are not considered as binding the individual as strongly to samsāra as heterosexual relations.[12] Still, Abbess B. reacted quite sternly vis-à-vis homosexual liaisons

[11] "Taiwan Women Web" discusses the way in which rape is dealt with in the secular sphere, which does not vary much from the religious attitude discussed above. Thus the current Buddhist attitude toward rape is more strongly influenced by society's norms than by the rules in the *Vinaya*, which explicitly state a *Pārājika* only to occur if the (raped) nun feels a single moment of sexual lust. Does the current interpretation of this rule reflect the androcentric belief that women experience pleasure during rape?

[12] Personal Communication, October 2003.

when privately discussing gender issues. So did Abbess A. during teachings.[13] Both believed it to be a transgression of the most basic vow, the abstinence of sexual activity, even though the vow regarding homosexual contact for nuns appears as only a *Payāntika.* Abbess A. did, on the other hand, deem rape by a male as a *Pārājika* and strongly emphasized that a raped nun should lose her status as *bhiksunī.* When I asked the nuns about this after the teachings, the younger newly ordained nuns were rather puzzled, and some disagreed. Nonetheless, Abbess B. is highly respected, and most nuns consider her teachings as accurate.

Hence while most rules in the *Vinaya* depict *deliberate* sexual activity, executed either manually or homosexually a less serious offence, *forced* sex with the *other sex* is considered a *Pārājika* in current practice, despite the *Vinaya* statement that *Pārājika* only occurs if the nun experiences sexual pleasure for a single moment. This illustrates the complex issue of precepts *versus* practice. Further, contemporary evidence indicates that even today sexual activity with the *other* sex is considered the main problem.

Nonetheless, not only sexual activity is focal to bodily practice in the *Vinaya.* Equally intriguing are questions of gender distinction. The sex of a person who seeks ordination has to be *indisputably* established. The *Vinaya* does not allow for the ordination of people of amorphous sex: eunuchs, those with dual sex organs, who can change their sex at will, or hermaphrodites, and the status of monastics ceases when their sex changes (Wu Yin, 2001: 95, 143, 145). Thus the sex of the ordinand has to be clearly distinguishable – by law. Moreover, women who have ceased to menstruate cannot receive ordination, but menstruating women cannot be ordained during that period (Lang, 1995: 36). In order to renounce, prospective nuns and monks had to "be able to *perform* sexually while keeping sexual desire in check, should be fertile, although her fertility should be controlled" (Lang,

[13] Conversation, 13.12.2002: Abbess B. stated that homosexual relationships exist in contemporary Buddhism while almost all younger nuns I asked denied its existence altogether.

1995: 35-36). Thus renunciation required an object to renounce; otherwise it would not have been genuine[14] – it required renouncing both, sexuality and fertility. Current data, however, evidences a control of fertility, but not a concomitant, or natural eradication of sexuality, providing sufficient evidence against arguments which assert the identity of monastics as asexual (for example, Keyes, 1984, 1986; Lang, 1995: 32; and others). Monks and nuns *remain sexual beings* until they have irrevocably suppressed, transformed, or overcome (sexual) desire (depending on the respective viewpoint and practice) – a state not easily accomplished, it seems, as some monastics disrobe, lead double lives, or have homosexual relations. The asexual, gender-free monastic is an ideal, not a reality.

Buddhist Views of the (Female) Body

> This body does not belong to you, nor anybody else. It should be regarded as an old activity that has been performed and intended and now to be left (*Samyutta Nikāya*, cited in Dissanayake, 1993: 128).

Buddhists of different traditions have long noted the constructed nature of bodily practice and of gender. Given the diversity of scriptures and schools, divergent attitudes toward the human body coexist in Buddhist discourse. Collins, for instance, identifies a nurturing attitude towards, and a "fine aesthetic appreciation" of the body in Theravāda Buddhism as illustrating positive attitudes vis-à-vis human embodiment (Collins, 1997: 187, 197), whereas some hold Theravāda Buddhist literature to represent the body as a filthy entity (Dissanayake, 1993). Others, conversely, argue that the attitude toward the body has changed over time – from seeing it as something to be detached from or transcended, to regarding it more and more as a filthy entity (Hamilton, 1995). Wilson (1995; 1996: 48ff) and Hamilton (1995: 53) believe that the progressively more negative depiction of the human body – in particular of the female one, occurred due to the increasing influence of

[14] This illustrates a conflation of fertility and sexuality in the *Vinaya*.

Brahmanism, which was overly concerned with purity and physical boundaries. And so, certain strands of Buddhist discourse depict the body as replete with filthy substances, which are, according to Gross (1993: 47), not gender specific. Similarly, Chan Buddhists referred to the body, and still do so today, as a "bag of defilements/filth" (Faure, 1995: 212; Zhang, 1997). In short, views of the human body are as complex and diverse as the history of Buddhist scriptures.

Most Buddhist schools converge in their emphasis on mental, or spiritual perfection – reflected in physicality. Not just the mind, but the body of a fully awakened one was and is considered unexcelled. The Buddha's body was believed to have been distinguished by thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, which were seen as revealing his complete perfection. Human bodies were correspondingly said to be characterized by thirty-two impurities (Obeyesekere, 2001: 12-13). In this way, the bodies of awakened ones differ from those of the "world of dust": the thirty-two marks of the Buddha are a direct antithesis to the unenlightened traits of ordinary humans. Accordingly, Buddhism is sometimes depicted as emphasizing continence. The physical ideal is said to have been a closed body, a paradigm not easily accomplished by women (who regularly menstruate) (Faure, 1998: 61-62).

While most of the thirty-two marks are gender neutral, one consists of a sheathed male sexual organ. Some interpret this as a sign of asexuality whereas others emphasize that the sexual organ is still that of a man, and thus a sign of masculinity (Paul, 1985: 219).[15] Most of the major and minor marks (let alone all of them) are neither displayed by women, nor by men. And yet, because the Buddha happened to have been born male, many Buddhist polemics posited that male embodiment is the sign of spiritual superiority. No doubt, the Buddhist ideal of physicality came to be represented by a male body, but ***no***

[15] Many female scholars believe this to be a sign of asexuality (see for example Gross, 1993: 62; Barnes, 1987: 120). Faure (2003), by contrast, provides a rather opposing, almost scandalous interpretation in characterizing the sheathed penis as a sign of emphasized maleness – virility, and more.

mortal male appears to have demonstrably displayed all major and minor marks up to the present day.[16] Hence there is little reason to contend that men, *because* they are men, are closer to awakening than women, for men are, in fact, short of just as many marks as women. In any case, although many scholars believe the thirty-two major marks to have had only a limited influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism ([Schuster] Barnes), 1981: 28; Gross, 1993), Mahāyāna Buddhists nonetheless imagine(d) transcendence as masculine (Humes, 1996: 123; Barnes, 1987: 118). "[...] In Buddhist literature the preferred symbol seems to have been a young male's ascetic body, a body which still resembles an ordinary male's but one which has abandoned traditional male roles, including procreation" (Barnes, 1987: 120). This ideal is still embraced by contemporary Buddhists in Taiwan, and surfaces in Chinese Buddhist history. Men are not alone in their aspiration to this ascetic masculinity. Women aspire to this ideal, too.

Discrimination against female embodiment may hark back to a fundamental paradox underlying Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. At the heart of Buddhism stands the conviction that life is suffering. According to the first Noble Truth, the greatest sufferings are birth, old age, sickness, and death. Closely linked to life, sickness, and death are reproductive events such as menstruation and childbirth. Thus three of the four components explicitly identified as suffering impinge stronger on reproductive women's lives than those of men. Moreover, the Buddha is said to have specified five additional sufferings of women: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, having to wait upon a man, and being subjected to in-laws (Kloppenborg, 1995: 163). In this way, Buddhist sources depict women as suffering more than men due to social and physiological factors. Right from the outset, womanhood was considered a state of greater suffering than manhood. Therefore, both the Indian and

[16] In the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition, however, certain masters (including female reincarnate lamas) are claimed to exhibit *all* major and minor marks.

Chinese discourses highlighted women's additional suffering, for it was women who went through the arduous labor of bringing to life what would vanish. More so than fathers, women, as active agents of procreation, were held directly responsible for people's existence, and thus simply being a woman (or more precisely a mother) made women vulnerable to latent bigotry.[17] Blaming women for giving birth is evidently a male projection. If a person had not created the karma to be reborn, no woman would have to go through the pain connected with childbirth. Nonetheless, such androcentric polemic demonstrates how the very body of a woman was (and still is) seen as a source of suffering.[18]

In contrast to regarding women as creators of suffering, Mahāyāna Buddhism also celebrates human rebirth. Of the six realms, the human realm is believed to be most conducive to spiritual practice, and while obtaining rebirth as a human is deemed extremely fortunate, obtaining rebirth as a *male* human is specifically auspicious (Dewaraja, 1981: 10).

Juxtaposing these two quintessential teachings might reveal the origin of the contradiction surrounding women's status in Buddhism. The statement regarding the additional suffering of women *a priori* allows for differential attitudes toward female rebirth, and the first Noble Truth, if interpreted in an androcentric way, implies a criticism of women for producing children. However, Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse simultaneously emphasizes the loving-kindness of the mother, and the indebtedness of the child to its mother for having produced a human.[19] This profound contradiction underscores Buddhist discourse and practices related to notions of female embodiment. It is little wonder then, that one voice of the Buddhist discourse denigrates women on account of their bodies while the opposite celebrates motherhood, emphasizing the suffering of women. Both

[17] Paul believes that in the Mahāyāna, "[...] mothers represented to Buddhists sufferers and perpetual givers of life in pain" (Paul, 1985: 60). Collins (1997) advances a similar argument.

[18] Note that the Buddha is said to have been born almost asexually (Winslow, 1980: 616).

[19] Lancaster cites the *Ekottarāgamasūtra* as a source for the debt of the child for having lived off its mother during pregnancy (Lancaster, 1981: 141-142).

views frequently coexist, even within single sūtras.[20]

The specific suffering of women, motherhood, and negative notions of female embodiment are above all predicated on women's reproductive bodies. Generally, Buddhist sūtras are said not to portray female bodies as particularly polluted (Barnes, 1987: 113),[21] but as depicting the *human* body as flawed and "leaking" filthy substances (Gross, 1993: 7; Wilson, 1996: 48; Zhang, 1997: 26). In view of this evidence it would seem safe to deduce in accord with Mary Douglas, that many Buddhists conceive all substances which cross the boundaries of the body as defiled.[22] But arguing so fails to explain why these substances are deemed filthy, hence it is necessary to analyze such views in relation to Buddhist philosophies of the body, and to the contradistinction of the sacred and profane.[23]

Parts of Buddhist discourse on the body can be depicted as contrasting the transcendent with the secular, or mundane. On a primary level, the body is the very vehicle by which humans can attain Buddhahood, but the physical level is transcended with Buddhahood. So, the very object which represents humanity, the body, is flawed because it signifies a state of ignorance. Through zealous practice, humans can transcend this ordinariness and attain spiritual perfection. The context of the thirty-two major signs of the Buddha indicated that 'pure' awakened beings are equated with nirvāna, and 'defiled' human

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[20] For details, see Sponberg, 1992.

[21] Xian posits that Buddhism did not discriminate against female physical processes (Xian, 1994: 308). Still, one (perhaps Chinese) sūtra characterizes the body of a woman as an "impure vessel, that it is inhabited by worms, that it should be despised and abandoned" (*Sūtra on Changing the Female Sex*, Ueki, 2001: 89). I have only encountered translations from the Chinese and do not know whether an Indian version of this text exists. If this text is indeed of Indian origin, then there is much room for the speculation that segments of Indian Buddhist discourse do portray specifically female physical processes as 'impure'.

[22] Contrary to Douglas' theory, Buddhists do not deem all substances crossing the boundaries of the body polluting. Breast-milk, as Cole evidences, is valued highly, and Chinese Buddhist discourse developed the idea of a 'milk-debt'. Cole analyzes how the Chinese Buddhist discourse bifurcates the female body into two halves – celebrating the upper part as pure, and denigrating the abdominal part as intrinsically impure (Cole, 1998: 230ff.) The widely read *Sūtra [Explaining that] the Kindness of one's Parents is Profound and Difficult to Repay* echoes this theory: 乳由血變 [...] 母血凝成胎兒食料. This apocryphal text reflects the belief that menstrual blood produces milk, indicating the conflation of sexuality and reproduction in Chinese Buddhist discourse (also discussed in Furth, 1999: 91). Such beliefs might hark back to endemic Chinese cosmology and are reflected in Chinese medical theory (see Furth, 1986).

[23] See Eliade (1957) for details.

bodies are aligned with samsāra. In this way, a fully awakened being triumphs over ordinary corporeal functions. This is also revealed in the Buddha's exceptional super-corporeal, or spiritual capabilities such as clairvoyance.[24] Sūtras thus differentiate clearly between spiritually perfected bodies and those of ordinary humans. While all human bodies are defiled, stinking and oozing with disgusting substances, the bodies of awakened ones are beautiful to behold.[25]

Faure (1998: 57) infers that Buddhists regarded physical fluids as metaphors for defilements, and the *Udayanavatsarajaparivartah* states, "all desires are suffering [...] the impurity of pus [...] pollution flows everywhere; the evils of desire are contemptible like these" (Paul, 1985: 30-31). This passage evidently uses 'impurity' as a metaphor for desire. Desire is considered polluted, not pus. Yet mental defilements, here desire, are associated with physical outflows – and those of women recur with regular frequency, unlike those of men. Kloppenborg (1995: 158) contends that the most frequently mentioned stereotypes in Buddhist writings connect women with their supposed sensuality and insatiable sexual desire – evident in their physical outflows.[26] Thus, not only is Buddhahood the direct antithesis to human embodiment in the way nirvāna and samsāra are opposites. In keeping with the above account, women are considered even more bound by samsāra and are therefore further removed from attaining Buddhahood than men.

Despite the fact that many sūtras depict the human body as filthy, they do not deem it polluting. Rather, the leaking substances of the body serve as illustrations of illusion, the law of impermanence, and the unsatisfactory nature of conditional existence (Wilson, 1996: 51,

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[24] That bodies of enlightened ones differ distinctively from those of ordinary mortals is also evident in the importance and potency attributed to relics of both the Buddha and great masters.

[25] In the Mahāyāna, the Buddha is believed not to pass feces (Williams, 1997: 219).

[26] Defilements are generally termed 'unenlightened emotions', which include anger, hatred, jealousy and so on. Chinese medical wisdom, however, held, that emotions manifest physically, and that women are inclined to be "emotionally unstable" (Furth, 1986: 58ff, 63). The combination of Chinese medical theory with Buddhist philosophy evidently brought about the conflation of matter and emotions and *vice versa*, which deprecated the former on account of the latter.

56). Although bodies may appear beautiful and youthful, they are subject to decay and emission of bodily fluids. They are not permanent, unchanging entities. Buddhist discourses on the body are thus often metaphorical teachings. The Buddha's final renunciation, explained as a consequence of seeing his sleeping palace women deprived of their beauty and splendor, and the episode of Māra's daughters who tried to entice him prior to awakening, is the core of this rhetoric (Gross, 1993: 47). As agents of Māra (illusion) women were portrayed as disguising repulsive aspects of their bodies (Wilson, 1996: 63, 71). Hence just like mundane reality, they are but illusions, "snares of Māra". Seeing women's bodies as illusions functioned as an object of meditation for monks primarily because Buddhism was a celibate religion dominated by men, and because the concept 'illusion' was central to certain Buddhist discourses.[27] However, later writings, including the hagiographic *Jātakas*, and various treatises by Indian masters elaborated this particular portrayal of women (Barnes, 1987: 118).

Buddhism, it has been reasoned, was originally not preoccupied with concepts of divinity (Barnes, 1987: 106).[28] In contrast to Daoism, where the body acts as mediator between the sacred and profane (Zhang, 1997: 29), Buddhism did not incorporate rituals to connect the two realms. Because spiritual perfection depends on the individual, it is unlikely that human bodies were deemed polluted in the sense that they inhibit the connection between a sacred and profane realm. Merely being in an ordinary body is rather a sign of ignorance. An awakened person did not reach that level through divine aid. Instead, a Buddha is a person who has liberated himself, or herself from the cycle of suffering –

[27] Blackstone's study demonstrates that the *therīs*, female renunciants, rather contemplated their own bodily decay whereas as the *therās*, monks, the decay of women. The *therīs*, she writes, were confronted with sexual advances and the like by men *after* they had attained liberation while the *therās* attained liberation *through* such confrontations (Blackstone, 1998: 26).

[28] Although Buddhism accepts the existence of gods (one of the six realms in Buddhist cosmology is the god-realm), their existence has no eschatological bearing on life in the human realm, for even gods are believed to be subject to suffering and rebirth. They are thus not fully awakened.

samsāra. Because s/he is free of all impurities, concepts, and karma, the body ceases to function ordinarily. Sūtras are explicit with regard to the transformation of physical characteristics of awakened ones (Barnes, 1987: 120). As stated before, Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse assumed a Buddha not to defecate and so on (Williams, 1997: 219), and Vajrayāna Buddhism in particular is replete with such imagery. Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism incorporate the belief in Bodhisattvas who postpone their final passing into nirvāna to aid those in need (Paul, 1985: 166-167),[29] and hence stronger elements of devotional activity in their discourse. For instance, Taiwanese Buddhists request the help of Bodhisattvas in various circumstances. The existence of spiritually advanced beings outside of oneself who are said to aid humans evidently widens the cleavage between the sacred and profane.

Further, Mahāyāna Buddhism assumes various levels of spiritual perfection. The belief in 'stages of awakening' allows for a comprehensive differentiation of humans. In this context, the *Bodhisattva Stages* (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*), a fundamental work in Mahāyāna Buddhism, considers female rebirth as inferior to male rebirth. "Completely enlightened Buddhas are not women. And why? Precisely because a Bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable [eon] has completely abandoned the woman's state [...]. All women are by nature full of defilement and weak of intelligence" (Willis, 1985: 69; Paul, 1985: 169).[30] While most sūtras appear to declare the human body as impure, they typically do not portray the female body as specifically polluting.[31] Quite the contrary, even though

[29] Among Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhists, the most familiar figure is Guanyin.

[30] Asangha's commentary on the *Bodhisattvabhumi* discusses the ten stages to awakening of Bodhisattvas and proclaims that after the seventh stage, Bodhisattvas are no longer reborn as women. Asangha deems every woman "by nature a person of many impurities and poor understanding" (Barnes, 1985: 108 n.21). The *Bodhisattvabhumi* was translated into Chinese in the fifth century and is said to have been influential in monastic circles. Note that Wilson (1996) uses predominantly the *Bodhisattvabhumi* as source in her discussion of "Buddhist" attitudes toward women, and unfortunately only provides a discussion of the context at the end of her study so that readers not versed in Buddhism are confronted with a somewhat skewed account.

[31] I did, however, find a section in one *Śastrā* that depicts the womb as impure, and *Jātaka* tales contain evidence from an earlier period of the idea that the Buddha was born without touching his mother's uterine fluids (Lancaster, 1981: 142).

many Buddhists may differentiate between the sacred and profane, they can, in contrast to Brahmans (Mosko, 1994: 31ff), attain perfection. Thus certain aspects in Buddhist discourse can be held align the sacred with mental, spiritual, and physical purity, giving all (male) humans the opportunity of transcendence – Buddhahood.

It is common knowledge that India was a patriarchal society where people were classified according to purity – women were habitually equated with 'Untouchables' (Kawanami, 1996: 70). Their bodies were considered the source of their pollution: "In Ancient and Medieval India, hymeneal blood was considered extremely potent, and its touch brought contamination" (Allen, 2000: 185). Thus at the time of the Buddha, Indian society quite possibly viewed the female body as polluting. But Buddhism does not appear to have espoused views of female pollution, although later writings of Indian Buddhist scholars do project blatant misogyny (Wilson, 1996). The influential texts *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya* by Vasubandhu, the *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra* by Asangha, and *Visuddhinagga* by Buddhagośa, a Buddhist convert from a Brahmin background, depict female bodies, and in the latter case specific uterine processes, pejoratively (Collins, 1997: 191). They are explicitly held to be filthy, a view that differs significantly from Indian sūtras. Because these texts are still part of the monastic curriculum in Taiwan, and studied widely, there is enough room for the speculation that their attitudes vis-à-vis female bodies, and women in general, influence Taiwanese Buddhist views (Ikeda, 1987: 191).

Nevertheless, sūtras do contain seeds of prejudices against female bodies. One of the most influential Mahāyāna sūtras in China, the *Long Sukhāvatī Sūtra*, implies that a person who recites it is reborn only as a man, and that in Amitabhā's Pure Land, "the word 'woman' is not even heard" (Gross, 1993: 65). Etymologically, '淨土 Pure Land' implies that '不淨 impure' things do not exist in this particular place. Yet what 'impure' actually designates has been interpreted quite differently (Zhang and Lin, n.d.: 7). Defilements such

as greed, hatred, and delusion are deemed impure, and it has earlier been discussed how 'impurity' originally designated the antithesis of enlightened characteristics (Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 1556, 4669). And yet, particularly in the Chinese case, the female body was devalued because it was believed to contain greater impurities than the male body. The discussion of Buddhist views of the body indicates that 'impurity' was often taken literally, and equated with bodily liquids. Judging from different views in sūtras in comparison with later Buddhist writings, it appears that over time, Buddhists increasingly interpreted 'impurity' physically, and not merely as mental afflictions.[32]

The *Sukhāvatī Sūtras* are extremely popular in Taiwan, and can be obtained free of charge in many temples as they are the fundamental texts of Pure Land Buddhism. Furthermore, the daily recitation of the *Short Sukhāvatī Sūtra* is compulsory for clergy (Günzel, 1994: 38). Sufficient evidence thus warrants the hypothesis that the recitation and interpretation of these sūtras influence Taiwanese Buddhist views of the female body.[33]

In contrast to this rather gloomy view of the female body, Mahāyāna Buddhism doctrinally also employs positive feminine symbols, such as the deified female *Prajñāpāramitā*, the Perfection of Wisdom (Macy, 1977: 319), and Mahāyāna Buddhism uses the symbol of a pregnant woman who is about to give birth to illustrate the unfolding awakening of a Bodhisattva (Barnes, 1987: 122). Further, a central conviction in Mahāyāna philosophy assumes all sentient beings to be endowed with the potential to attain Buddhahood. This potential is called *tathāgatagarbha*, or '*tathāgata*-womb/embryo', often mistranslated as "Buddha-nature" (Paul, 1980), a mistranslation, argues Gross (1993: 186), based on Western

[32] Reaching its climax in Vajrayāna Buddhism, where practitioners sometimes visualize impurities in the form of bodily effluviae.

[33] Aside from Amitabhā's paradise, another paradise hints at questions of female embodiment. In Akshobya's Pure Land, women are no longer subjected to the suffering of menstruation.

scholars' androcentrism.[34] Similarly, the Chinese translation of the term reads 如來藏 *Rulaizang* '*tathāgata*-storehouse', which deprives the term of its original female gynocentric connotation.

Gender and Sexual Transformation in Buddhism

There is much evidence that most Buddhist schools did not consider gender and sex as static entities. As stated earlier, once the sex of a monastic changes, the person's status as a fully ordained *bhiksu(nī)* automatically ceases. The *Vinaya* is not alone in its reference to sexual transformation. It also appears in sūtras and non-canonical writings (Paul, 1985: 171, 174) – indeed "a common occurrence" (Faure, 2003: 11).

The ability to transform one's physique is said to have been one of the supernatural powers cultivated through meditative practice ([Schuster] Barnes, 1981: 50ff). Hīnayāna Buddhism employed specific meditation techniques where practitioners visualized themselves in a particular form. With an increasing proficiency in the respective meditation practice, the physical form would then slowly resemble the mentally created one. Yet only those who had attained liberation were said to achieve this level of spiritual prowess. Reaching such an elevated state required having "mastered the practice of the contemplations, [...] essentially one must be in total control of one's mental processes [...]" (Ibid.). In this framework, once the realization of emptiness was said to have occurred, one was able to transmute one's body. Collins also attests to the (Theravāda) Buddhist belief in the transformation of the body through meditative realizations, and the way in which "salvation is conceived as a spiritual state manifested in mind and body" (Collins, 1997: 195, see also 201). Likewise, Chan Buddhism espoused views of the transformative potential of

[34] Throughout this thesis, androcentrism refers to the collapsing of the male and female into a generic human form, sexism to disparaging attitudes toward women, and misogyny to an overt loathsome attitude toward women, the female, and feminine, be it proclaimed by women, or by men.

the body. The aim of meditative practice, posits Faure (1995: 213), was "to create a pure adamantine body". Correspondingly, the belief in the ability of Buddhist practitioners to "create a body made by [their] own mind" is a pan-Buddhist concept, according to [Schuster] Barnes (1981: 50). Gender, or sex transformation in most of Buddhist literature and thought therefore depends on a view of the body that stresses its fluidity through meditative practice, and on the assumption that body and mind are interdependent even though they can be separated (Dissanayake, 1993: 141).

Not surprisingly, then, Mahāyāna discourse contains a number of sex-change stories. While the transformation of women into men is a prominent theme, several stories also depict women who oppose the need for sexual transformation.

> Śāriputra: "Goddess, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?"
> Goddess: "Although I have sought my 'female state' for these twelve years, I have not yet found it. Reverend Śāriputra, if a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her 'what prevents you from transforming yourself out of the female state'?"
> Śāriputra: "No! Such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform?"
> Goddess: "Just so, Reverend Śāriputra, all things do not really exist" (*Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra* translated by Thurman, quoted in Willis (1989: 72-73).

In the same sūtra, Śāriputra insults a woman who promptly transforms him into a woman (Paul, 1985: 221ff). But no matter how entertaining, interlocutors never cited these episodes. They referred more frequently to stories where women transform into men, particularly the "Devadatta Chapter" of the *Lotus Sūtra.* The *Lotus* has a much wider readership in Taiwan than the *Vimalakīrti.* Here, Śāriputra proclaims: "the body of a woman is filthy and not a vessel of the Law", after which a *nāga*-princess transforms into an advanced Bodhisattva (Levering, 1982: 23).[35] This story is often interpreted as representing the transformation of female to male, while in fact a non-human girl eventually transforms

[35] According to Faure, *nāgas* were considered the "embodiment of ignorance and passions" (Faure, 2003: 92).

into a full-fledged Bodhisattva (Watson, 1993: 188). Levering (1991) refers to a number of men who discuss this story. Among them, some assume the girl to have been awakened prior to her transformation, which occurs to prove Śāriputra wrong, while others argue that she has to transform into a man before she can attain Buddhahood.

Several scholars allege the belief in sexual transformation to have emerged as a reaction against the concept of the Mahāpurusa, the "Great Man" (Paul, 1985; Sunmin, 1999: 130; Ueki, 2001: 94, 101; Kajiyama, 1982: 56-58).[36] This rather contradicts transformational views of the body. The Mahāpurusa referred to the status of a Buddha *in spe*, who had to be able to take five specific positions: a Universal ruler (*Rājā-cakravartin*), a *Śakra-*, *Marā-*, or *Brahmā*-god, and a Buddha (Barnes, 1987: 117-118). These were very plainly male privileges at the time. Yet, it should be added that the Chinese empress Wuzetian proclaimed herself a *Rājā-cakravartin* and Buddha, so there have been testimonies to the contrary (Paul, 1979; Yü, 2001a: 4). Nevertheless, since women were generally banned from occupying these ranks, they were thought to be subject to the five obstacles.

The concept of the five obstacles is assumed to have had little significance in the Mahāyāna because of its emphasis on emptiness (Barnes, 1981: 28). The *Diamond Sūtra*, one of the most widely recited sūtras in Taiwan (and formerly, China), clearly elucidates that a Buddha cannot be grasped through forms, and that one cannot identify a Buddha on account of exterior appearance. And yet, women were deemed incapable of attaining the five ranks and hence Buddhahood due to the five obstacles – translated as five *zhang* 障 into Chinese (Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 917). *Zhang* is part of the composite character for obstacle, defilement, and attachment *yezhang, zhang'ai* 業障, 障礙. In popular understanding,

[36] Sunmin goes so far to hypothesize that the belief in the transformation of women in Buddhism might in fact have been a concept espoused by the rival Devadatta sect (of the Buddha's cousin) that later infiltrated Buddhist discourse, a hypothesis that is highly questionable given the pervasiveness of this concept (Sunmin, 1999: 128).

the socially inaccessible ranks were (quite possibly) associated with mental defilements. Today, interlocutors mainly argue women to be less capable of attaining Buddhahood because of their *yezhang* and *zhang'ai*. Not a single interlocutor referred to the five *zhang*, the five obstacles, as a reason for women's spiritual inferiority. Rather, womanhood *itself* was deemed to render them less likely to attain awakening during this lifetime. This demonstrates that teachings on 'emptiness' and the '*tathāgatagarbha*' theory might have been widely accepted concepts in relation to social rank, but not apropos spiritual potential.

Sunmin believes the theory of the transformation of women to have been a reaction against misogyny: "preconceptions and prejudices concerning women's impurity gave rise to the theory of women's sexual transformation at the time of enlightenment" (Sunmin, 1999: 131), and Barnes contends: "changing the female body" stories were a reaction against "traditional views of the spiritual limitations of women. It challenges the earlier notion that women's bodies are visible evidence that they have not reached a high level of spiritual maturity" (Barnes, 1981: 54). She claims so on the basis of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra* (Chinese: *Dazhidulun*), attributed to Nāgārjuna, which explicitly states: "women can also become Buddhas by transforming their female bodies" (Ueki, 2001: 101).

These hypotheses are propounded on the assumption that Buddhism experienced a linear historical development with reactions and counter-reactions toward misogynist tendencies. This assumes a feminist consciousness, or at least a concern about attitudes toward women among putative (male [*sic*]) redactors of Buddhist teachings that are claimed to be successive developments, and not the teachings of the "historical Buddha". The textual transmission of Buddhist scriptures still has to be accurately determined. These theories are thus established on the basis of a number of premises which have not been irrefutably established. Moreover, they entirely disregard the Buddhist conviction of the

fluidity of the body. Hence they require re-evaluation.[37]

Gender or sex reversals were not only recorded, or imagined as occurring during one lifetime. They could take place over the course of a number of lifetimes as in the saga of woman Huang, a theatrical popular performance of a Buddhist woman who dies and is reborn as a man (Grant, 1989). This story in its many variants implies that due to her piety and positive karma, Huang was reborn as a man in whose form she was *then* able to save her relatives, illustrating the necessity of masculinity for the achievement of (spiritual) feats.

However, in the best-case scenario, a woman transforms into a man in the present (Müller, 1993: 176-177). Generally speaking, the sex change literature is problematic as it allows for interpretation in both directions. [Schuster] Barnes (1981), Paul (1985) and Ueki (2001: 93) (who believe sexual change to symbolize mental transformation) understand these stories as the affirmation of women's spiritual potential while Peach (2001) holds a thoroughly contrary view. Chinese Buddhist history and contemporary practice exhibit similarly diverging opinions. While some teachers, as Levering's studies (1982, 1992, 1999) show, emphasized the spiritual capacity of women on account of these stories, others denied it on the same grounds. The current and historical "*Dazhangfu*" 大丈夫, the 'Great Man' phenomenon supports Peach's thesis, ascertaining these stories to have been more commonly understood in a literal way. On the one hand, then, the surviving and prevalent belief today that women can become 'Great Men' illustrates a certain confidence in their spiritual potential. On the other hand, they do become men, so trust is rather placed in the resultant male than the original female. While men already are masculine, women have to exert effort to exhibit masculinity.[38] So, the same double-edged sword that wields its might in the sex change stories cuts through gender constructs in the contemporary sphere.

[37] See also Gross (1993: 56) for a critique.
[38] Chapter Seven discusses this topic in detail.

Chinese Perplexities: Gender & Sex Differentiation, Transformation and Reversal

Buddhism was not alone in its assessment of sexuality as having the potential for transformation. In Chinese culture before the 20th century, gender was not simply established on the basis of anatomical difference (Brownell *et al.*, 2002b: 32; Elvin, 1993: 224). Throughout the history of Chinese medical writing, androgyny was the ideal (Furth, 1999: 306) – Chinese culture conceived all human bodies as "structurally similar" (Dikötter, 1995: 40). They were believed to consist of *Yin* and *Yang*, and their respective dominance, or imbalance allowed for gender distinction. The dominance of either force was not considered inherent or stable, as *Yin* and *Yang* continuously change.[39] And so, in Chinese thinking, transformation was not only seen as structuring the world at large, but also as underlying gender and sex distinctions[40]: "The potential for transformation and change was seen as one of the fundamental, inherent powers of the human body" (Furth, 1999: 305; 1988: 4). Gender was deemed fluid and flexible.

Despite such idealized androgyny, specifically revealed in early medical texts which testify to the belief that female and male bodies are quintessentially the same (Harper, 1998), later discourses emphasized women as "ruled by blood" and "men by *qi*" (Furth, 1999: 2, 265).[41] Hence, even though similarity was stressed, female difference was later acknowledged. "Although all bodies contained *Yin* and *Yang*, blood and *qi*, and thus emphasized their common humanity, they also inscribed onto bodies the gendered hierarchy of human social relations" (Furth, 1999: 265). The ostensibly androgynous ideal provided mechanisms through which gendered hierarchy could be inscribed.

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[39] "*Yin* and *Yang's* very multivalence produced a view of nature as suffused with gender attributes that did not depend on the body alone for the point of reference" (Furth, 1999: 311).

[40] For details regarding classical Chinese views of transformation, interdependence, *Yin* and *Yang*, and so on see: Cammann, 1987; Graham, 1986; Granet, 1997; Le Blanc, 1985; Major, 1991, 1993; Robinet, 1992; Robinet *et al.*, 1993; Wilhelm, 1977; Wilhelm, 1956.

[41] Pneuma, prana, or energy, in short, that on which life depends in Chinese cosmological and medical conception.

Still, neither gender, nor sex was considered static. Similar to Western pre-modern views as elaborated by Lacquer, sexual difference was not imagined as a profound biological difference rooted in reproductive anatomy. Rather, in China, sex difference was permeable and alterable, "conceived of as a question of degree rather than of essential nature, not an anatomical but functional and processual conception of the body" (Bray, 1995: 236).[42] In Chinese history, sexual transformation was a possibility which was predicated on concepts that differ dramatically from Western views of the body and mind. Ames indicates that Chinese considered the body "a *process* rather than a *thing*, something *done* rather than something one *has*" (Ames, 1993: 168). Moreover, since classical times, body and mind were not bifurcated as it has been in much of Western philosophy. Rather, Chinese held the notion, and today still largely adhere to the dictum that "the body is a reflection of the mind" (Elvin, 1993: 213). Because mental changes had a bearing on the body, one's physique (including sexual organs) was believed to be subject to change, too. Therefore, the belief in the potential of change of body and mind, and fluidity of the conception of gender and sex allowed for the possibility of sexual reversals, documented throughout Chinese history – particularly recorded as omens. Imperial histories, for example, provide evidence for the transformation of men into women and *vice versa*. Yet while the transformation of women into men appears to have been appreciated, the corresponding transformation of men into women was regarded with suspicion (Furth, 1988).

Sex and gender were not only transmutable. They were socially adjudicated. According to Brownell *et al.* it was more important whether one behaved in a way that was socially construed as "masculine" or "feminine" than the nature of one's anatomy. "Social gender overshadowed sexuality in the definition of categories of male and female [...]. In China, gender symbolism, sex-linked symbols are often secondary to other more fundamental

[42] For a comparison of Western and Chinese theories, see Furth, 1999: 12ff.

principles of moral and social life. This is because the structure of sex-linked symbolism mirrors the social structure, in which gender is situated within a broader network of social relations that takes precedence over the dyadic sexual relation" (Brownell *et al.*, 2002b: 25-26). And so, Furth (1999: 305) differentiates between bodily gender, which she explains as "based on plastic androgyny", and social gender, "based on fixed hierarchy."

Sommer (2002: 71) and Goldman (2001: 71ff) provide strong evidence for a general suspicion against the clergy, because the clergy was considered amorphous in terms of gender and sex. "Qing law tried to reinforce clerical vows by prohibiting clergy from what was considered masculine activity. Apparently, jurists suspected that the vow of celibacy might be no more than a disingenuous façade masking real motives and intents; that is, they believed this apparent non-male to actually be "a predator made all the more dangerous by his disguise" (Sommer, 2002: 83). Sommer's discussion shows that men who were penetrated by men were no longer considered chaste. Thus the one who was supposed to penetrate, in being penetrated, lost his manhood, for during the Qing dynasty, penetration signified being non-male (Sommer, 2002: 78). He provides further evidence for the permeability of gender distinction in Chinese culture, showing how the discourse of the Qing dynasty "blurred the lines of gender and sex so that physical difference and change were appraised in terms of capacity to fulfill normative social roles" (Sommer, 2002: 67). In summary, Sommer assumes the distinction of male and female in the Qing dynasty to have been rooted in the difference of practice between penetration and being penetrated rather than pre-existing anatomical determinants.

A comparable aspect can be detected in Chinese conceptions of motherhood, which were not primarily based on biological factors (Bray, 1997). Instead, social motherhood overshadowed biological motherhood. If the main wife failed to produce a male heir, the first male offspring of a concubine assumed the position of the heir, and was thereby

considered the son of the main wife.[43]

Another illustration of the pre-eminently social performance of gender, and concomitant sexual change are eunuchs, who were not considered full males. Their gender reversal was obvious because they lost their male status through castration. However, more importantly, eunuchs could *legally* be taken as concubines, yet they were not allowed to marry. "The efforts of eunuchs to define themselves as *socially* males can be regarded as a strategic manipulation of gender symbols, an attempt to claim power in a patriarchal world" (Brownell *et al.* 2002b: 27). According to Brownell *et al.*, the practices of eunuchs demonstrate that *masculinity* was socially symbolized by household headship in the context of marriage, male clothing and so on, but also determined by a *functioning* male organ, rather than one which existed but was not used, as in the case of the male clergy. Therefore, even though gender was predominantly socially defined in Chinese history, corporeal practices were nonetheless significant. The discussions in Brownell *et al.* (2002a) indicate how Chinese visions of sex and gender differed significantly from Western gender dualism, and that the distinction between the sexes was often permeable. To summarize, "cosmological and biological beliefs allowed such phenomena [sexual transformation] to be seen as dynamically 'changing' bodily functions rather than as static structural irregularities, and to

[43] This aspect is still reflected in social practice in contemporary Taiwan. After divorce, the new wife assumes the role of the (step)-mother since fathers usually retain custody for the children. The practice of child marriage, the "borrowing" and exchange of children and so on are all indicative of a profoundly different conception of motherhood and family organization in comparison with contemporary Western views, where the mother-child bond is more strongly emphasized. Several of my interlocutors were divorced, and had thus experienced pain and separation from their children (in the case of the mothers), and several were "borrowed" children. Wolf recorded in the 1970s the belief in allaying infertility by "borrowing" a baby, which was usually absorbed into the family, but often did have ties with its biological family. Interestingly, several interlocutors were such "borrowed" children, and Tsung (1978) maintained that such individuals were more likely to request ordination. One of my interlocutors, Ms Gao, related the details of her suffering during childhood to me. As a "borrowed" child, she never truly became part of her new family and was used as a servant by her mother and siblings, but her father doted on her. Shi De, also a "borrowed child" indicated that her parents doted on her and because of this, she experienced much jealousy during her childhood. The borrowing of children, the custody of children after divorce by the father were considered as natural by interlocutors, which confirms previous anthropological discussions. However, with decreasing birth rates, population pressure and better (sex) education, people appear to be more attached to their biological children. I did not encounter younger people, that is, under 20, who were "borrowed", or "adopted".

be accepted within the bounds of genuine if imperfectly understood natural phenomena" (Furth, 1988: 19).

Conclusion

This discussion vividly illustrates the complexity of studying gender in Buddhism. It provides considerable evidence for the (de)-construction of gender and sexuality in Buddhist texts, doctrines, and Chinese culture – (de)-constructions which differ significantly from contemporary Western views. Both Buddhist and Chinese conceptions of sex and gender stressed fluidity. Perhaps this is not merely based on the conviction of the interdependence of body and mind, but also on basic Mahāyāna teachings, impermanence and emptiness, and on a crucial Chinese concept – the ever-changing nature of the world and its contents. While Buddhist and Chinese views of the body were compatible, tension surrounded questions of femininity and female pollution.

If nothing else, this discussion shows how Buddhists in China attempted to reconcile indigenous views of the body, gender, and family with imported concepts – a thorough reconciliation that paved the way for the conception of the phenomena discussed in Chapters Six, and Seven.

☙ *Chapter Three* ❧
The Victory of Traditional Femininity?

Tzu-chi[1] 慈濟, the "Compassion Relief Society", stands at the center of discussions on Buddhist gender relations in Taiwan.[2] Today, critics attack Tzu-chi for promoting a traditional ideal of femininity, while supporters defend Tzu-chi for elevating femininity and encouraging a positive image of womanhood. These two opposing positions both suggest that the promotion of femininity is a central feature of Tzu-chi.

The various reasons for Tzu-chi's success illustrate core issues in contemporary mainstream Taiwanese Buddhism, and gender relations therein. At the same time, they reveal significant deviations from the norm. Indeed, Tzu-chi could be considered a reaction *against* many of the views discussed in later chapters. Since Tzu-chi's success exposes trends and counter-trends in contemporary Buddhism that are significant for the understanding of Taiwanese Buddhism – including Buddhist gender relations, and because it has been privileged in the literature, Tzu-chi is considered first.

The triumph of Tzu-chi must be understood as a response to a number of stimuli, the

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[1] Tzu-chi is used instead of the Pinyin version *Ciji*, and *Cheng-yen* instead of *Zhengyan* throughout the thesis as this transcription is widely used by the organization.

[2] Women in Taiwanese religion have received increasing attention, for example Ahern (1975, 1981, 1988), Harrell (1986), Overmyer (1991), Reed (1994), Seaman (1981), Tsung (1978), Zhang (1997). Published studies on women in Taiwanese Buddhism are genuinely scarce, though they have gradually increased during the last five years (Cheng, n.d. [online]; Chern, 2000 [thesis]; DeVido, 2000 [online]; *Hu, n.d. [online]; Huang, 2001 [thesis], 2003; Huang & Weller, 1998*; *Laliberté, 1998*; Levering, 1989; *Lu, 1997a [unpublished]*; Tenzin, 2000 [thesis]; Yü, forthcoming; Zhang and Lin, n.d. [unpublished]). Further, several papers on Taiwanese Buddhism were presented at the Sakyadhita Conference in Taipei in 2002 (abstracts have been published on the internet). The majority of published studies focus exclusively on Tzu-chi (in italics), as does one section in Jones (1999) and Pittman (2001) respectively, or on the Luminary Buddhist temple (Chen, Tenzin, Yü). Because the latter is a very prestigious single-sex nunnery (established by Ven. Wuyin), it cannot be considered as representing gender relations in Buddhism in Taiwan. As for Tzu-chi, Huang and Weller's study is the most exhaustive and insightful. Lu's two papers provide interesting data, but her analyses are somewhat constrained by her own involvement in Tzu-chi. Tzu-chi has therefore been privileged by Western scholars (not to mention the numerous publications on Tzu-chi in Taiwan). Shi's work (1995) in Chinese, on the other hand, is not academic as it condenses material published in Western languages (without references throughout), even though she provides a useful section on Buddhism in China and Taiwan. Zhang and Lin (n.d.), by contrast, rely largely on observations and interviews with the Buddhist elite, but some of their conclusions are dubitable. Yet their paper, and that by DeVido are the most comprehensive. Still, comprehensive academic studies on gender and Buddhism in Taiwan remain scant.

most significant being connected to its lay focus, the secularization and simplification of Buddhist doctrine and practice, its emphasis on charity; and specifically apropos gender, its broad involvement of women, and the encouragement of a specific feminine ideal for laywomen. This model, officially propagated, complies on the one hand with traditional Chinese femininity and womanhood, and on the other hand breaks decisively with hegemonic masculinity. Unofficially, however, Tzu-chi nuns are encouraged to comply with ascetic masculine norms. And so, Tzu-chi's promotion of femininity goes hand in hand with the encouragement of masculine ideals. These two diametrically opposed paradigms are determined by the status of the respective woman, that is, either monastic, or lay. Conforming fully to traditional Buddhist ideals, Tzu-chi thus sustains a double standard in models for women: the feminine laywoman and masculine nun. When it comes to men, however, Tzu-chi encourages a certain feminization.

A Woman's World

Like most large Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, a charismatic member of the clergy founded Tzu-chi. But unlike other successful Buddhist groups, it was a woman, Ven. Cheng-yen 證嚴, who established Tzu-chi. Founded in 1966, Tzu-chi became one of the biggest Buddhist associations in Taiwan within three decades. Tzu-chi's success has been unfaltering, and 20% of the population contributes to its activities. Tzu-chi is thus the first globally active Taiwanese Buddhist organization inaugurated by a woman, though nuns had previously succeeded their teachers as abbesses of certain temples. Closely connected to its female leadership is the predominance of women adherents, a central feature of Tzu-chi since its conception: today, approximately 70-80% of its members are female (Hu, n.d.; Jones, 1999: 59, 202, 216; Huang & Weller, 1998: 384; Lu, 1997a: 12).

Laywomen dominate Tzu-chi. This stands in stark contrast to other large Buddhist

associations, which are structurally dominated by the male clergy. Several scholars concur that the social profile of Tzu-chi adherents primarily consists of wealthy middle-class women, often housewives (Huang & Weller, 1998: 388; Lu, 1997a: 12). More than 50% of its members are aged 40-60, who are frequently characterized as rather frustrated with their domestic lives (Lu, 1997a: 23). Tzu-chi's celebration of their familial role in society at large might help such women to overcome their difficulties in the domestic sphere. Articles on the web page of the foundation repeatedly stresses how women's active involvement has changed their family lives, and alleviated the suffering they experienced at home, especially when their husbands decided to join Tzu-chi as well. And so, the fact that "Tzu-chi urges middle-class women to extend their family values and roles to the wider society and forge a new identity as mother to the world" might contribute greatly to the appeal of Tzu-chi for a certain class of women – women who remain in their household roles (Huang & Weller, 1998: 384, 386, 390). In this way, Tzu-chi appropriates their womanhood into a Buddhist framework that extols women as nurturers, confirming family values. At the same time, Tzu-chi adherents are active beyond the limits of their families, but because their actions comply with mainstream values of womanhood, they do not lose their social respectability (Huang & Weller, 1998: 387-388, 393). Instead, their social activism and achievement in society enhance their prestige.

The status of women in Tzu-chi depends largely on how many followers they introduce into Tzu-chi. In scrutinizing the organizational structure of Tzu-chi, Lu describes the proselytizing process, where "hens give birth to chickens", the hens being commissioners, and the chickens their students. The number and success of a "hen's chicks" determines her status. Despite the fact that women take the lead in this relationship, some men act as "hens" (Lu, 1997a: 18-20). However, the hen-chicken metaphor clearly evokes images of motherhood and care. In "giving birth to chickens", feminine generative

power is insinuated. Thus Tzu-chi uses gynocentric terminology to designate its process of growth and proselytizing. This stands in stark contrast to mainstream Buddhist groups which are headed by men, and deploy androcentric language. Such gynocentric metaphors undoubtedly enhance the status and self-esteem of Tzu-chi women considerably.

Lu believes Tzu-chi, similarly to the "hen-chicken" bond, to be generally modeled on a "mother-centered family", where kindness and care dominate. Further, she assumes female traits to serve as paradigms for Tzu-chi's ethics – men and women alike have to comply with these standards (Lu, 1997a: 17, 22, 23). Lu presents this "feminization" as unique to Tzu-chi, suggesting that Ven. Cheng-yen heightens "feminine principles" by extolling obedience, modesty, compassion, and patience (Lu, 1997a: 5) even though popular religion and traditional Buddhism have always extolled women as nurturing, caring and compassionate mothers (Weller, 1987: 50; Faure, 1998: 136). Hence the feminine image advanced by Ven. Cheng-yen complies with traditional ideals. Many of these characteristics cannot be regarded as specifically "feminine", or "female", as Mahāyāna Buddhism is famous for its insistence on loving-kindness, compassion, patience and care, for both women and men. Therefore, Ven. Cheng-yen's extolling of these virtues reveals her adherence to Mahāyāna doctrine. It is not necessarily aimed at changing gender-roles.[3]

Thus in contrast to monastic Buddhism and popular religion, where the central positions and important ritual roles remain reserved for men, Tzu-chi's core leaders are women (Huang & Weller, 1998: 381, 387, 388; Reed, 1994: 238). Reed observed how popular worship attracts primarily middle-aged women (Reed, 1994: 237). So the social profile of women engaged in popular worship and those active in Tzu-chi is similar. This connection is also revealed in the fact that many of Tzu-chi's initial members were followers

[3] Unless it could be said that Mahāyāna aims at changing gender roles. However, even then, such emphasis is Mahāyānist, and not specifically that of Tzu-chi.

of popular religion (Lu, 1997a: 8). Hence, Tzu-chi appears to attract women who aspire to fairly traditional models of femininity, and maybe in particular those who were previously drawn to popular religion.

Tzu-chi's Philanthropic Focus

Several scholars hold that the most important aspect of Tzu-chi's appeal is its "secular focus", a trend both in contemporary Asian Buddhism, and a feature of Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism which harks back to the secularizing movement of the Chinese masters Ven. Yinshun and Ven. Taixü at the beginning of the twentieth century (Jones, 1999: 134ff, 223; Pittman, 2001; King and Queen, 1996). Like other secularizing Buddhist movements in Taiwan, Tzu-chi aims at building a "Pure Land" in the present: "Motivated by sincere love, [...] we can build an ideal society and create the Pure Land of the Bodhisattvas" (Ven. Cheng-yen).[4]

This Pure Land is not imagined as an abstract state of mind, but as a concrete transformed society. It cannot be created in self-cultivation on a meditation cushion, as some Buddhist practices prescribe, but has to be created through charity and social work. Thus Tzu-chi focuses exclusively on charity and social work. Donations made to the organization are not invested in pompous temples or comparable projects. Instead, funds are exclusively used for charitable undertakings – Tzu-chi has not only established hospitals, a university, kindergartens and so on in Taiwan, but engages in disaster relief and other charitable activities worldwide. Accordingly, Tzu-chi focuses on charity, medical services and related actions.

Ven. Cheng-yen does therefore not emphasize traditional forms of religious practice such as meditation. Instead, adherents can enhance their "face" by means of public work

[4] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 17.08.2001]

since the actions Tzu-chi devotees engage in are socially valued. Although historically, monasteries did invest in charity – an important part of Chinese Buddhism since at least the Tang dynasty (Ch'en, 1964: 265ff, 295), the dimension of these projects was more limited than Tzu-chi's.

Tzu-chi Buddhism therefore stretches beyond the confines of a temple or shrine (Huang & Weller, 1998: 386). In this way, Tzu-chi allows its followers to incorporate Buddhism into their daily lives – it brings religion into their families and into the streets. Thus Ven. Cheng-yen obliterates the dichotomy between secular life and formal spiritual practice. As a result, laywomen are able to view mundane activities as part of their religious practice, endowing their quotidian existence with a sacredness transcending the profane.

The image presented on the cover page of the Tzu-chi monthly bespeaks of theories advanced by Huang and Weller who stress the Christian influence on Tzu-chi. It illustrates an image of femininity that connects women to the household sphere (the women are preparing lunch boxes), while transcending the simple family image as the women prepare food in large quantities for those in need. And so, this photo illustrates graphically Ven. Cheng-yen's emphasis on extending maternal love beyond the confines of women's families to the world at large, and her emphasis on pragmatic action (Huang & Weller, 1998: 380-387, 390; Pittman, 2001: 285).

Photo 1: Tzu-chi members prepare lunch-boxes[5]

[5] http://taipei.tzu-chi.org.tw/product/mon.htm, Cover of the *Tzu-chi Monthly*, issue 418, 25.09.2001 [Accessed: Sep. 2003].

The results of Tzu-chi's social work are very tangible and to some extent predictable – in contrast to popular worship, where the response of the gods is clouded in the mist of uncertainty. Likewise, traditional Buddhist practice is less material than Tzu-chi's practices (save for almsgiving). The effect of traditional forms of Buddhist practice, such as study, contemplation, meditation, the recitation of sūtras, mantras, and so on can simply not be easily measured, compared and displayed. Consequently, tangible and predictable results from adherents' actions – rather than karmic merit which ripens perhaps only in future lives – might be a crucial factor for the enormous success of Tzu-chi. This is clearly a force attracting not only many followers and sympathizers, but also sponsors.

Lay Involvement

Huang and Weller do not understand Tzu-chi's success as a unique phenomenon, but as the continuation of popularizing movements that aimed at incorporating Buddhism into laypeople's lives (Huang & Weller, 1998: 380, 386). Drawing parallels between Tzu-chi, Chinese and Western philanthropic societies, they argue that these organizations flourished under very similar socio-economic conditions; that is, an increasing affluence of the population and general urbanization (Huang & Weller, 1998: 390 ff). Their argument is sensible, yet contemporary Taiwan differs considerably from Taiwan at the beginning of the twentieth century, from China in general, and from Western societies. The current impact of globalization and information technology make comparisons between Tzu-chi and Western charitable societies of the nineteenth century problematic, for these developments are unprecedented in world history.

Furthermore, the dedicated religious activity of the laity draws on a long history of lay involvement in Chinese Buddhism, and specifically in Buddhism in Taiwan (Ch'en, 1964: 449; Goldfuss, 2001; Jones, 1999: 13; Shih, 1992: 1) – yet historically, the laity and clergy are

said to have competed for power in Taiwanese monasteries (Tsung, 1978: 140). In contrast to countries where the elite controls religion, Taiwanese religiosity was largely in the hands of the laity until the arrival of Mainland Chinese monks. With the relocation of the BAROC, Taiwanese laypeople lost control over their religious affairs. The laity's resentment of the BAROC's patronizing attitude to Taiwanese Buddhism can be observed in the inauguration of the Buddhists' Laypeople's Association, established at approximately the same time as Tzu-chi and Foguangshan. Considering the longstanding involvement of the laity in Chinese Buddhism and Taiwanese religions, it is likely that the inauguration of Tzu-chi and the Lay People's Association were a "protest against the exclusion of the laity from power" (Jones, 1999: 184ff). The strong lay involvement as evidenced in Chinese and Taiwanese history therefore lives on in the present. As such, the power shift in Taiwanese Buddhism should be considered a decisive factor for the current commitment of the laity to Tzu-chi and other Buddhist organizations.[6]

Because of the heavy involvement of the laity, Tzu-chi can be conceptualized within the framework of lay Buddhism. It draws heavily on the financial, temporal and human resources of the laity, hence its success fundamentally pivots on its members' activism. In contrast to traditional Buddhism, Tzu-chi's social activism is not aimed at the clergy (Huang & Weller, 1998: 383; Lu, 1997a: 11; and Jones, 1999: 216; 187 ff). On the contrary, Tzu-chi targets laypeople – those in need, of medical treatment, emotional support, disaster relief or people in pecuniary difficulties (Günzel, 1998: 115). Traditionally, the clergy is the harbinger of Buddhist activities and doctrine, engaging primarily in education, self-cultivation and so on. Tzu-chi's action, by contrast, is rather driven by, and, most importantly, aimed at the laity.[7] Consequently, its lay focus is certainly a magnetizing force.

[6] Note that lay Buddhists largely control Tibetan Vajrayāna centers.

[7] Significantly, the temple where Ven. Cheng-yen started her career as a religious leader was primarily

Secularization and Simplification

Tzu-chi's focus on the laity goes hand in hand with a secularization and simplification of Buddhist doctrine. Ven Cheng-yen openly privileges action: "Reading sūtra is no better than practicing sūtra" (Lu, 1997a: 8). Unlike other groups, which assemble to recite sūtras and so on, the alliance of women within Tzu-chi is based on "sharing their domestic experiences" (Lu, 1997a: 14; Weller, 1999: 357). In this way, members obtain a greater sense of satisfaction than with more solitary forms of religious practice:

> Master Cheng Yen's wisdom in teaching people to train their minds through their actions. How can one explain this? First of all, there is no discrimination with regard to age, gender or social status among all the environmental protection volunteers. They all come together for a purpose. Old folks forget about the arthritis in their knees, the boss of a large company takes off his suit and folds cartons, and petite women work as strongly as the men. All work mindfully without looking around or chatting idly with each other. Isn't that the same as doing spiritual cultivation?[8]

This passage demonstrates Tzu-chi as appealing because it does away with conventional hierarchy and concepts of seniority, or physical strength – which is not to say that Tzu-chi does not have its own homemade hierarchy. However, since mundane tasks such as separating garbage are considered a form of spiritual cultivation, participants can nurture their self-confidence – noticeable in many conversations with Tzu-chi adherents during my fieldwork. That women in particular develop such manifest self-confidence in the religious realm might indeed be groundbreaking.

Ven. Cheng-yen opposed prevalent Buddhist customs from the very beginning, as evident in her following vows: she vowed not to act as a Dharma teacher or abbess, not to accept ordained disciples, not to perform funerals and other rites, not to put on Dharma meetings to generate an income, and not to subsist on donations, a vow she and her nuns have observed since (Jones, 1999: 202-203, 205, 206). Her adamant adherence to not

managed by lay Buddhists (Jones, 1999: 203).

[8] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07.2001].

subsisting on alms certainly contributes to her charisma. Thus her innovation in defiance of doctrinal Buddhism lies in asserting equality between the laity and clergy while emphasizing charity as the central focus of spiritual practice. Interestingly, Ven. Cheng-yen did not receive monastic training (Lu, 1997a: 7).

Tzu-chi practitioners apparently believe they can achieve awakening through social activism (Lu, 1997a: 11, 26), which breaks significantly with doctrinal Buddhist views. This aspect seems unique to Tzu-chi. Even though Ven. Cheng-yen appropriates the Bodhisattva ideal into charity, she is little concerned with metaphysical theorizing. Instead, she considers social work as a means of improving one's karma – explaining problems encountered in life as the ripening of karma, which, by the way, is not unique to Tzu-chi. And so, Tzu-chi focuses exclusively on the present instead of being concerned with future or previous lives (Huang & Weller, 1998: 380, 385-387, 389).

Ven. Cheng-yen not only revises traditional forms of religious cultivation, but also the most important set of practices in the Mahāyāna to attain Buddhahood. She completely reinterprets the notion of the six *Pāramitās*,[9] adapting them in the same way as other core doctrines into the framework of charity. The first of the six *Pāramitās*, the perfection of generosity, is usually hierarchically organized. Generosity depends on the subject and object. Donations to the clergy are believed to accrue more merit than donations to others, yet Tzu-chi's resources are almost exclusively used for secular society. Therefore, although Ven. Cheng-yen stresses the importance of generosity in accordance with doctrinal Buddhism, she has significantly reinterpreted its import in her refusal to accept alms, or build temples.

The social work Tzu-chi activists have to undertake, such as separating garbage, is often regarded with suspicion and disdain by Taiwanese (Zhang, 2000), but Ven. Cheng-yen believes that adherence to the vow of fulfilling even the dirtiest job is the perfection of

[9] The six *Pāramitās*, or Perfections, are the key to the attainment of nirvāna in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

patience. To achieve the perfection of joyous effort, devotees are advised to keep the vows of dedicating their energy, time and money. Ven. Cheng-yen views the continuous adherence to this vow over a lifetime as the perfection of diligence. She interprets the perfection of meditation as the utmost concentration during social work. According to Jones, Ven. Cheng-yen argues the perfection of wisdom not to require meditation and study – in utter contrast to traditional Buddhist views. Instead, she advances the theory that the realization of non-duality occurs during the "transaction of charity" between donor and recipient. Ultimately, the perfection of wisdom in Tzu-chi is therefore based on social work, which Ven. Cheng-yen holds, enables the discarding of mental afflictions. In this way, her reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine fully eschews solitary ways of self-cultivation.

Ven. Cheng-yen's program of self- cultivation is evidently ingenious in reinterpreting doctrinal Buddhism in the light of social work. The six *Pāramitās* are no longer weighed down by philosophical concepts. They are thus easily implemented by Tzu-chi Buddhists. Despite this, Ven. Cheng-yen maintains and emphasizes the *bodhicitta*[10] motivation of Mahāyāna Buddhism: all action has to be exerted in the spirit of loving-kindness and compassion (Jones, 1999: 214-215).

An even more captivating aspect of Ven. Cheng-yen's reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts is her transformation of the notion of *shentong*. *Shentong* is considered difficult to cultivate and to result only from intense meditation and contemplation over the course of many lives. Average Buddhists are rarely believed to "have *shentong*". These abilities are mainly attributed to great masters. Ven. Cheng-yen can be said to possess the traditional version of *shentong*. Her dreams of Guanyin and the light radiating from her hut while she

[10] *Bodhicitta*, literally, the awakening mind (often translated as enlightenment mind), is central to Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Bodhisattva ideal, denoting the will to attain awakening for the sake of all sentient beings.

practiced austerities are viewed as expressions of *shentong* by her followers.[11] Furthermore Ven. Cheng-yen is said to have healing abilities (Jones, 1999: 203, 211). In contrast to the rather spurious examples of *shentong* discussed in Chapter One, Ven. Cheng-yen transforms the interpretation of *shentong*, reasoning *shentong* to refer to "followers tak[ing] the work of association and export[ing] it far and wide" (Jones, 1999: 214). Ven. Cheng-yen's secularization of *shentong* deserves attention because it almost contradicts doctrinal Buddhist tenets. It interprets proselytizing as an extraordinary spiritual capability.

Ven. Cheng-yen reinterprets the notion of *samadhi* (meditative absorption) in a similar way. She claims that an activist is able to achieve *samadhi* during the process of charity work if s/he "concentrates upon the recipient" (Jones, 1999: 214). Meditative absorption is extremely difficult to achieve and usually requires the dedicated practice of meditation over years, hence Ven. Cheng-yen's simplification certainly renders this practice appealing. Several scholars allude to the difficulty of meditation (Davison & Reed, 1998: 46; Jones, 1999: 115), and, as discussed in Chapter One, only a few interlocutors claimed to meditate regularly. Either, they said they could not find the time, or a conducive environment for meditation, or they simply did not know how to meditate. This argument came rather as a surprise considering the large number of Buddhist teachers, monastics and monasteries, literature and TV programs in Taiwan. Many complained about difficulties they face as a result of their own mental instability, due to external factors, such as the lack of adequate guidance, stress or environmental hazards such as noise pollution. In short, many had difficulties with their praxis of meditation, which may explain the attractiveness of Ven. Cheng-yen's reinterpretation of meditative absorption.

This discussion clearly indicates that Ven. Cheng-yen simplifies and secularizes doctrinal Buddhism in various ways. Alongside "doing Tzu-chi", some maintain more

[11] Here, the question is not whether such phenomena exist, but how followers view Ven. Cheng-yen.

traditional practices, they chant sūtras in local gatherings, or discuss Ven. Cheng-yen's writings in local meetings in relation to everyday life, but not in relation to doctrinal or philosophical matters. Ven. Cheng-yen gives talks and has published various articles and books, but as with discussions in local meetings, these are only marginally concerned with Buddhist philosophy (Huang & Weller, 1998: 383).

For this reason, many interlocutors thought Tzu-chi to be an entrance point for Buddhist practice – predominantly appealing to certain people. They considered it an important basic level of Buddhist practice. Once this level is surpassed, many argued, Tzu-chi Buddhists move on to other ways of spiritual practice. For instance, a number of nuns had been active members of Tzu-chi before they were ordained while others became Tzu-chi nuns. Shi Da, who had left Tzu-chi, considered it inappropriate to continue working for the organization firstly, because it is predominantly a lay organization, and secondly, she thought that as a nun, she should practice differently, and not just engage in social welfare activities.[12]

Ven. Cheng-yen's reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine and her secularization of Buddhist practice indicate that for Ven. Cheng-yen, ultimately, only action counts. Traditional Buddhism, by contrast, emphasizes that intention outweighs action (Ch'en, 1964: 5). Ven. Cheng-yen's emphasis on action in opposition to doctrinal Buddhist tenets must be seen as crucial to her success, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows the practitioner to view every aspect of life as a form of practice. Secondly, it does away with the insistence on study and self-cultivation practices that have traditionally been valued highly, but that only a minority of the population was actually able to implement. In the past, women were especially disadvantaged due to their inferior education, or lack thereof. Indeed, Lu (1997a: 23) points out how demographic data suggests that most of the initial female Tzu-chi

[12] Conversation with Shi Da, Taipei, Nov. 2002.

followers had received little or no education. This might partially explain why predominantly middle-aged women are active in Tzu-chi, as men of the same generation probably received a more thorough education. Sūtras, for example, were composed in Classical Chinese. Their understanding requires intensive study, in addition to the obvious requirement of literacy (Blofeld, 1975: 131). Hence the Buddhist way of life advocated by Ven. Cheng-yen is more practicable and accessible than traditional forms of spiritual cultivation. What is more, solitary forms of self-cultivation do not allow much space for socializing, yet socializing is a central feature of Taiwanese culture (DeVido, 2000; Moskowitz, 2001: 118; Schipper, 1993: 3). Social work, by contrast, provides ample opportunity to interact with others. Tzu-chi's secularization and simplification of Buddhist doctrine and practice thus works on many different levels.

Ven. Cheng-yen and Guanyin

From the very outset, Ven. Cheng-yen principally inspired women. Hence she was and remains *the* role model for her followers. Because Ven. Cheng-yen is believed to be the personification of compassion, she is associated with the Bodhisattva Guanyin, one of the most revered Bodhisattva in China and Taiwan (Blofeld, 1988). Most scholars concur that Guanyin serves as Ven. Cheng-yen's inspiration, yet the importance of Ven. Cheng-yen's visions in connection with her study, teaching, and embodiment of the Guanyin ideal has not been sufficiently stressed.

As indicated by Jones (1999: 199), Ven. Cheng-yen vowed to redeem twelve years of her life if her mother were to recuperate from a serious sickness. She then had auspicious dreams of Guanyin for three consecutive nights after which her mother recovered without medical treatment (Laliberté, 1998). Most Buddhists consider prophetic dreams to be signs of spiritual mastery, and only spiritually evolved persons are deemed able to be in direct

contact with Bodhisattvas. Consequently, her visionary dreams of Guanyin are at once a testimony to her spiritual insight, and to her intimate connection with Guanyin.

In this regard, Ven. Cheng-yen's emphasis on the *Lotus Sūtra* (Jones, 1999: 202; Lu, 1997a: 7) is significant, because chapter twenty-six, the 普門品 *Pumenpin* "Universal Gate Excerpt" pertains exclusively to the activities of Guanyin. Ven. Cheng-yen's frequent references to the *Lotus Sūtra* in her teachings (Huang & Weller, 1998: 383) further evoke her connection with Guanyin. Moreover, the *Lotus Sūtra* has traditionally been associated with Guanyin worship (Reed, 1992: 160).[13] And so, interlocutors often connected Ven. Cheng-yen with, or considered her an emanation of Guanyin, a deification process also noted by one Western observer[14] and Günzel (1998: 115). Not only this, but more significantly, Ven. Cheng-yen refers deliberately to herself as the body of Guanyin and her helpers as her 1000 arms, which reveals her deliberate association with Guanyin.

As a spiritual guide, Ven. Cheng-yen embraces experiential visions, pragmatic action and written sources. As the agency of compassion, Ven. Cheng-yen acts as the direct link between devotees and Guanyin. In brief, Ven. Cheng-yen impersonates Guanyin, "followers seek to emulate her" (Jones, 1999: 210). So, Tzu-chi Buddhists are able to identify with Guanyin via Ven. Cheng-yen. In the same way as Guanyin saves all sentient beings in any given situation in the *Lotus Sūtra* (Canpary, 1996: 83), Ven. Cheng-yen, or Tzu-chi is considered to rescue people from various hardships. Clearly, she translates Guanyin's capacity for salvation into charity. The reason for Ven. Cheng-yen's success therefore lies not only in her ability to secularize Buddhism in the context of charity, but also in her embodiment of a role model that on the one hand symbolizes enlightened activities, and on the other hand is profoundly human. For most people it is evidently much easier to identify

[13] Reed (1992: 169) suggests that Guanyin devotion has always been aimed at coping with marriage rather than escaping from it. We will see below that Ven. Cheng-yen also emphasizes this paradigm.
[14] Private conversation, Canberra, RSPAS, May 2003.

with a human being than with a Bodhisattva, a connection even closer if both disciple and teacher belong to the same gender.[15]

The Numerical Predominance of Women

The syncretistic tendency of Taiwanese religiosity also characterizes Tzu-chi. Ven. Cheng-yen draws on various sources, including Confucianism, Pure Land Buddhism and Catholicism (Huang & Weller, 1998: 380 and 382; Lu, 1997a: 7). This synthesis addresses the needs of, and inspires a particular *generation* of women. Although the number of young women in the clergy and Tzu-chi is slowly increasing (Lu, 1997a: 1, 23), younger women in Tzu-chi are in the minority, and the Tzu-chi web page speaks of the need for "new blood". Does the image of women advocated by Tzu-chi fail to inspire younger women?

Taiwanese society encourages rather than discourages certain women to take the lead in Tzu-chi. However, the numerical predominance of women in Tzu-chi might simply correspond to that of other religions. Various studies stress the predominance of women in Chinese religion in general (Blofeld, 1947: 22; Levering, 1992: 212; Weller, 1999: 356), and in Chinese Buddhism in particular, a factor Jones (1999: 152) discusses with respect to the clergy. For example, at Foguangshan, one of the largest Buddhist organizations in Taiwan (a monastic institution in the traditional sense with a large clergy and temples on the island and worldwide), the ratio of nuns to monks is 4:1 (Lu, 1997a: 2). Similarly, participant observation in Taiwan demonstrates how the lay community also comprises a larger number of *active* female believers.[16]

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[15] Instead of the teacher-disciple relationship of opposing genders, which was the standard until recently (Blofeld, 1947: 57). Lu, for example, observed that the bonds between Ven. Cheng-yen and female followers are more primary and intimate than between her and male adherents (Jones, 1999: 202; Lu, 1997a: 12).

[16] The main sponsors might, however, be male, a fact I observed in several Tibetan Buddhist centers in Taiwan, and that was alluded to by Abbess B. in private conversations. Here, questions of the division of labor require contemplation, for the sex ratio in the religious sphere may simply parallel that of the secular sphere; i.e. men as bread-earners become sponsors, and women as housewives become activists in religion. Statistics indicate women to be more likely to give up employment after childbirth, while over 15% of the female

Economic independence, better education, a greater sense of self-autonomy and a higher status of women in society are assumed to contribute to women's strong involvement in Buddhism (Lu, 1997a: 2; Shih, 1995; Zhang and Lin, n.d.). However, in Taiwan, this numerical predominance may also be related to the decline of ancestor worship (Reed, 1994: 226), which might have become unattractive for women, who had to worship a patriline's ancestors.[17]

Klein suggests a more universal explanation. "Women live closely with signs of their mortality and shifting stages of life – monthly bleeding, (absence of) pregnancy and menopause" (Klein, 1992: 34); a reasonable explanation for women's religious activism in general.[18] Reed (1994: 235) and Lu (1997a: 2) both hold that women are religiously more active because of their responsibility for the well being of their families. Reed believes this results in their seeking of help, but also states that in order to "compensate them for the suffering they have received due to patriarchal views of women," women frequently turn to popular religion (Reed, 1994: 242). This hypothesis may equally apply to Tzu-chi, but further research is required before a conclusion can be drawn.

Androgyny or Hyper-Femininity?

Based on the numerical predominance of women in Tzu-chi, Lu posits that, "Buddhist ideology provides people with a profound basis to degenderize themselves when constructing their religious identities" (Lu, 1997a: 5-6), yet it is questionable whether her statement fully applies to Tzu-chi. She claims two trends in Tzu-chi: the "feminization of the Buddhist image" and "androgynization of Buddhist identities". In this context, she

workforce engage in unpaid voluntary work (Taiwan Women Web). Such a binary hypothesis is nevertheless too simplistic, as the workforce does comprise a high percentage of women, and today women have greater economic independence than in the past. Hence, women also sponsor religious events. It would, however, be a worthwhile undertaking to study this possible correlation.

[17] This topic deserves further inquiry, see also Hsieh, 1981.

[18] See Farris (1994) for a discussion regarding Taiwanese society.

defines "androgynization" as the "blurring of the roles and attitudes socially assigned to gender" (Lu, 1997a: 5, 6; 1997b: 113). It will be discussed below how this "feminization" is in fact hyper-feminization – an overemphasis of conventional aspects of femininity that ignores socially constructed masculinity, except for work ethics where "petite women work as strongly as the men."[19]

While several scholars discuss the "feminization" of Tzu-chi, they do not deploy Lu's theory of "androgynization". "Androgyny" is defined as the elimination of sex differences, or their conjunction. Lu's examples do not depict "androgyny" but rather a reversal of gender roles: women perform duties socially ascribed to men. Correspondingly, Lu (1997a: 24-25) argues that men engaging in tasks culturally construed as female illustrates the androgynization of Tzu-chi. It is debatable whether a man should considered "androgynized" because he helps with the housework. That is only a change in the conventional sexual division of labor and does not justify the label "androgyny". Furthermore this change in labor division has been established as transient.[20] Instead, women's roles in Tzu-chi correspond closely to those of Taiwanese society. Conventional masculinity does not appear to influence the ideal for women. Quite the opposite, Tzu-chi reveals a hyper-feminization which relies predominantly on traditional Chinese models of maternal femininity. At the same time, some aspects of hegemonic masculinity are consciously challenged, which inscribes a certain feminization of male members (discussed below). In short, the ideal for laywomen does not approach an androgynous ideal. An androgynous ideal would require both women and men to "androgynize".

[19] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07.2001].

[20] "Before the men's auxiliary group was founded, women handled traffic and so on, but today, the sexual division of labor again conforms more closely with society's norms" (Jones, 1999: 211).

Encroaching on Hegemonic Masculinity

On the one hand, Tzu-chi promotes a traditional feminine ideal that largely ignores current notions of hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, because of its focus on maternal femininity, male members are encouraged to cast aside certain aspects of masculine hegemony.

In addition to the traditional five lay precepts, which advise people to abstain from sexual misconduct, taking life, stealing, lying and consuming intoxicants, Ven. Cheng-yen requires her male followers specifically to refrain from smoking, chewing betel nuts, and gambling – including video games and the stock market. Men are told to be filial sons, good fathers and husbands, and are urged to wear seatbelts and helmets (Jones, 1999: 215). Incidentally, "not engaging in anti-social behavior, that is, eating meat, smoking opium/cigarettes, chewing betel nut and gambling" were part of the precepts followed by adherents of *Zhaijiao* 齋教, the 'Vegetarian religion' (Jones, 1999: 15).[21] These, and the requirement to be "good sons and husbands" evidently target hegemonic masculinity. Ven. Cheng-yen is further said to ask men not to participate in politics (Huang & Weller; 1998: 391), but is sometimes criticized for having close connections with politicians and businessmen (Pittman, 2001: 291).

Ven. Cheng-yen's insistence on additional precepts for men indicates a discrepancy between the gender hierarchy of doctrinal Buddhism and Tzu-chi. Whereas traditional Chinese Buddhism, as discussed in the following chapter, often describes women as more defiled on account of a larger number of vows for nuns, Ven. Cheng-yen proposes additional precepts for her male followers! Generally, though, women indulge less

[21] See Jones (1999) for details. The 'Vegetarian religion' was a syncretistic movement that consisted mainly of women. An emphasis on a vegetarian diet, including abstinence from onions, garlic, and similar substances resulted in its name, 'Vegetarian religion'. Although claimed to be largely defunct today, its legacy lives on in new religious movements (Günzel, 1998: 18, 105-109).

frequently in these activities, as they are constituents of male hegemony.

Men are exposed as being less capable of cultivating loving-kindness and compassion in two instances (Lu, 1997a: 18, 25), and the audience of the English web page, for example, is evidently expected to be female as the generic pronoun 'her/she' is used throughout.[22] One article on the web page emphasizes Tzu-chi to have first flourished due to the efforts of housewives. However, it also suggests that the use of the media, alluded to earlier, had a direct effect on Tzu-chi's growth. Nonetheless, although supposedly introducing the auxiliary team for men, a specific division within Tzu-chi that consists exclusively of men, the article stresses the female character of Tzu-chi.

> The Tzu Cheng organization not only gives men the opportunity to act, but it also *injects their masculine qualities into the originally all-female Tzu Chi community* [...] we would now like to present these articles on *the guardians and supporters* of Tzu Chi – the Tzu Cheng Faith Corps. *You will see how these men, so successful in their fields of work lay aside their status and prestige and come to blend their wisdom with the compassion of the commissioners.*[23]

This excerpt emphasizes the formerly female character of Tzu-chi, delegating men to the position of *supporters* rather than authorities, in stark contrast to other religious groups where men have powerful positions and women support. Women usually bring their husbands and often the entire family into Tzu-chi (Lu, 1997a). This discrepancy may contribute to its different gender outlook, for, in contrast to Taiwanese society, husbands join Tzu-chi due to their wives' activism.

Women, and not men, serve as models in Tzu-chi (Lu, 1997a: 17, 29). While the article aligns men with wisdom, it associates women with compassion, a portrait many interlocutors who were not Tzu-chi members depicted during conversations. Further, men renounce their "status and prestige" while active in Tzu-chi. Hence men are associated with the public sphere, with prestige, but in contrast to women, who continue their familiar roles

[22] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 17.07.2001].
[23] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07.2001]; emphasis mine.

in a religious context, celebrating their traditional secular role, Tzu-chi encourages men to leave specifically male activities behind. Even so, men still have to conform to certain explicitly masculine standards: "The men are as disciplined as soldiers, yet at the same time they are gentle and modest."[24] Elsewhere, the writer puts it: "Tzu Cheng members are just as *obedient and disciplined* as any regular *soldier* [...] they should possess *moral integrity* and serve others with a sense of *virtue*. With their neat appearance and faithful observance of the precepts, they have become a positive influence on society. That is exactly what the master expects them to be [...]" (Ibid.). Tzu-chi men are soldiers in the service of Tzu-chi. They are not only disciplined and obedient, but also virtuous. So, men conform to the hegemonic model of masculinity in its martial dimensions, marshaled to a religious framework, but are simultaneously expected to be virtuous and gentle. Accordingly, Tzu-chi men are required to conform to certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity, and at the same time break with masculine hegemony.

> Men have too many bad habits. Even some men themselves admit this. Generally speaking, smoking, drinking, gambling and chewing betel nuts are the common bad habits of Taiwanese men. But to Chang Wen-lang, the most difficult precepts are to "observe the traffic rules [...] maintaining a pleasant tone of voice or gentle expression is even more difficult."[25]

Hence mainstream masculine hegemony is associated with "bad habits" such as imbibing intoxicants and gambling, which explains the additional precepts for men. Tzu-chi requires men to break these habits, and to have a "pleasant tone of voice or gentle expression". Gentleness is thus expected in appearance and speech, traits that were historically associated with scholarly masculine ideals (Louie, 2002), but that are currently certainly not considered part of hegemonic masculinity, which rather emphasizes stamina and machismo. Further, through Tzu-chi's influence, men are said to learn to express their love, quite uncharacteristically for Chinese men, and thereby enhance their filial piety. At

[24] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07. 2001].
[25] http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/ index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07.2001].

least, that is the image the Tzu-chi web page imparts.[26] And so, Tzu-chi men comply with hegemonic masculinity in the image of the Tzu-chi soldier, retaining aspects Tzu-chi considers useful, but they also break with habits that are socially defined as masculine. The web pages illustrate how Tzu-chi targets "male" behavior. Although these examples are not conclusive, they do insinuate that Tzu-chi encroaches on hegemonic masculine ideals.[27]

In view of the above evidence it seems reasonable to posit women's status to be higher in Tzu-chi than in other organizations. The web pages depicts the initial female supporters of Ven. Cheng-yen as highly respected, as role models. Zhang and Lin (n.d.) pointed out that the status of nuns is higher in female-only groups – an almost trivial argument. Tzu-chi, albeit not a one-sex group, was initiated and remains controlled by women. The florescence of Tzu-chi shows how within a power structure that is in female hands, the prestige of women can remain high even when men join the group, and how female values can influence and structure the character as well as role models of an organization.

The Tzu-chi phenomenon reveals that the sex of the head of a group decisively influences the disciples' attitudes vis-à-vis gender. By virtue of its female leadership, Tzu-chi's attitude toward femininity deviates significantly from clerical Buddhism, which also came to light in another temple headed by a woman. Abbess B. had male and female

[26] "Since he has visited poor families and taken part in international relief measures for a long time, Chang, who grew up in the country and used to be very conservative, has learned how to express his love to his parents. Although he was a good son, he just didn't know how to express his love before. Therefore, his sense of filial piety has been reinforced." (http://www.tzuchi.org/global/offices/index.html#, no date [Accessed: 18.07.2001].

[27] Lu advances the hypothesis that Ven. Cheng-yen embodies both father and mother roles (Lu, 1997a; Jones, 1999: 217). While it is convincing that she adopts a maternal role, it is not credible to claim that her sternness can be considered as representing the father. Mothers are not only gentle and kind. Likewise, while the argument that Tzu-chi functions as a family is convincing, it is a truism applicable to most religious organizations. A religious group considers itself as a family to create a sense of connection and intimacy, especially when one of the central tenets is that of continuous rebirth, which implies that most have been closely related to one another in one life or another. Furthermore, the religious group views itself as a family in a metaphorical sense: the 'family' should not be taken too literally. To assume that a family requires both a mother and father is simply a secular cultural imposition. Margery Wolf (1972) has shown the father to have had a somewhat distanced position in rural Taiwanese families, and studies of Chinese society in general confirm her findings. Hence, not surprisingly, none of the disciples view Ven. Cheng-yen as a father. In fact, the examples cited in Lu (1997a) indicate how male and female disciples alike view her as a mother.

disciples, and only a few of her followers distrusted women's spiritual potential. Unlike men of other groups, the male members of this particular organization had a distinctively non-discriminatory attitude vis-à-vis women and their spiritual potential. Likewise, the nuns during the ordination who lived in exclusively female temples appeared to be much more self-confident than those from mixed temples. Two abbesses, in fact, emphasized the *absolute* need to segregate the sexes and to live in single-sex communities. Interestingly, though, I observed that those very nuns who lived in single-sex communities had unrealistically high views of men, perhaps because they had little, or no contact with them. But that is not to say that hegemonic notions of female inferiority are not internalized, or reproduced in female single-sex communities.

Traditional Forces

In her study of Buddhism/women and selfhood, Klein (1995) warns about the danger of emphasizing compassion and selflessness to the extreme of neglecting the individual's needs, a danger also encroaching on Tzu-chi. Ven. Cheng-yen instructs her followers to transform negative situations and experiences into challenges; for example, feeling grateful for abuse, and viewing it in the light of being given the opportunity to practice patience (Jones, 1999: 215). This approach is in itself not new. Yet, Jones cites one example that also illustrates possible drawbacks of such traditional attitudes. One lady approached Ven. Cheng-yen for advice concerning her husband's extra-marital affair. "Ven. Cheng-yen instructed her to feel gratitude for this opportunity to reflect on impermanence, and to generate pure love, not only for her husband, but for the mistress as well" (Jones, 1999: 216, citing Lu). This advice is surely a challenge in terms of spiritual cultivation and the transformation of thought patterns, but whether it helped the woman to deal with the situation is another question. Here, loving-kindness is exalted to the extent that this woman's needs are entirely ignored.

Instead, she is told to accept her current situation and to conform to society's norms in remaining a loyal wife. Many interlocutors and friends thought this kind of counsel to be appropriate, but considered most people as unable to implement it due to their limited level of realization.

The systematic avoidance of confrontation, both on a personal as well as national level, was noted by Huang and Weller (1998: 390, 394) – Ven. Cheng-yen does not challenge patriarchal values (Jones, 1999: 216-217). "The ideas that institutions promote generally support the social status quo, simply because major institutions that fundamentally oppose the power structure are not likely to survive long", may explain why Tzu-chi refrains from challenging the social order (Weller, 1987: 7). "Taiwanese culture highly valued the role of the mother, encompassing a benevolent and caring image, with the requirement of chastity, submissiveness, and modesty" (Lu, 1991: 35, 52; Lu, 1994). Tzu-chi unquestionably conforms. It reinscribes maternal femininity for women, perhaps because Confucian values remain omnipresent in Taiwan society (Huang & Weller, 1998: 382; Reed, 1994: 241). Inevitably, then, Ven. Cheng-yen rather accentuates extant social expectations.[28] In brief, "Tzu-chi combines a very traditional ideal of womanhood with a very modern sphere of action in the world", giving women the opportunity to "extend their power without fundamentally challenging the social order" (Huang & Weller, 1998: 390).

[28] Huang & Weller (1998: 381-382) flesh out a tension in Ven. Cheng-yen's life. She fulfilled the epitome of filial love by exchanging twelve years of her life for her mother's recovery. On the other hand, she personifies the Buddhist quest for salvation, exemplified by her seeking ordination against her mother's wishes, echoing the stories of Maoshan and Mazu (Dudbridge, 1978: 23ff, 91). This conflict between the filial requirements of Confucian culture and personal salvation was already an issue during the fifth century, as several life-stories in *Lives of the Nuns* demonstrate (Tsai, 1994). Grant (1999: 92) depicts how nuns were portrayed as "models of proper Confucian behavior", a conspicuous tendency even today. Ven. Cheng-yen is therefore not the first person to reconcile the conflict between pronatalist views and sexual renunciation, between filial obligation and religious liberation. Rather, she draws on a long history of a culture of compromise in her resolution and transformation of this contradiction.

The Other Side of Tzu-chi

To this point, this chapter exposed Tzu-chi's virtually fundamental appraisal of traditional femininity. "Every woman with a spiritual philosophy should cultivate her mind and body so she is like the moonlight, *merciful* and *soft*," (Ven. Cheng-yen, cited by Jones, 1999: 213). Officially, women are required to be "merciful and soft". The *Prologue* referred to a temple where Chern was given different answers when she appeared with and then without a tape recorder. She wrote about Tzu-chi's temple in Hualien, and her respondents were none other than Ven. Cheng-yen's disciples. The nuns had told her that Ven. Cheng-yen holds that, "a woman should express their *Yin* characteristics, speaking with a soft voice, not too loudly [...but that] after shaving their hair, their appearance is the appearance of a *Dazhangfu*" (Chern, 2000: 315). Despite the appraisal of maternal and traditional femininity, Ven. Cheng-yen promotes a distinctively different ideal when it comes to her monastic disciples. Hence although femininity is officially promoted, masculinity nonetheless remains the ideal, at least for the clergy. But femininity and masculinity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They are deployed according to the respective circumstance. However, the fact that the nuns gave Chern an opposing answer when she appeared without a tape recorder suggests that feminine values constitute the official "party-line", while the contrary model for the clergy is typically not revealed.[29]

As discussed in Chapter One, Chinese philosophy characterized the mainstream model of femininity as obedient and subservient (Overmyer, 1991: 93). Buddhism, in China and elsewhere, complied with and accepted the role model of the mother and wife (Tsomo, 1999a: 8). Similarly, the masculine ascetic ideal has been amply documented as a feature of Chinese Buddhism since the Song dynasty, if it is not *the* spiritual model of many Buddhist

[29] This vividly elucidates the methodological dilemma scholars face when studying gender in the context of institutionalized religion.

schools *per se* (see Chapter Seven for details). Therefore, Tzu-chi's espousal of two apparently contradictory role models largely adheres to traditional Chinese Buddhist views. The paradigm for laywomen corresponds to traditional visions of femininity, as much as the paradigm for nuns conforms to the traditional emphasis of ascetic masculinity.

Conclusion

> Religious practices often enact understanding of what men and women are and what they should hope to be. Women are most often supported by their religions to enact ultimate meanings in a domestic, family context. Men are likewise most often supported in their search for fulfillment in leadership, or accomplishment in the public realm (Levering, 1991: 219).

Tzu-chi's vision of laywomen corresponds for the most part. Although women can attain leadership roles, Tzu-chi encourages their religious activism in a context which is entirely grounded and phrased in familial imagination and terminology. However, the Tzu-chi ideal for men varies significantly from current hegemonic masculinity. While some secular masculine elements are retained, they are combined with character traits that are generally deemed feminine. Yet many of these characteristics are part of Mahāyāna Buddhist ideal, and thus cannot be considered exclusively feminine. Nonetheless, the qualities expected from men differ from those in secular society, and specifically from those of the business sphere. In this way, Tzu-chi proposes an ideal of masculinity that on the one hand complies with Buddhist core values, but that, on the other hand, breaks significantly with stereotypical social norms.

The feminine norms Tzu-chi adheres to are best understood as a reflection of mainstream femininity. The feminization of male Buddhists, by contrast, provides a model of masculinity that is reasonably novel. These role models should not be viewed as binary, as only certain aspects of masculinity are deconstructed while those deemed useful are retained. But Tzu-chi might be considered innovative – even subversive – in targeting men's habitual patterns.

As for femininity, however, Tzu-chi conforms fully to society's and Buddhism's norms. As cited in Chapter One, women in Taiwan "must in some way come to terms with dominating Confucian values" (Reed, 1994: 241). Tzu-chi undoubtedly fulfils its filial obligation to Confucianism so much so that it has become perhaps the most successful organization in Chinese (Taiwanese) history inaugurated and controlled by women. Tzu-chi does not offer women a vastly alternative route in their exploration of womanhood, but remains within the confines of the acceptable and familiar in a modern and global context. Presumably for this reason, Tzu-chi's success remains unfaltering. It might thus be inferred that women who adhere to, or need the security of established role models constitute the majority of Tzu-chi's active members. As Tzu-chi does not challenge their worldview, it surely is, as so many interlocutors maintained, a path much easier and safer to walk on than the monastic way. Still, it does not require the rejection of femininity, as it is often the case in celibate Buddhism. Rather, it gives women the freedom to explore their social potential as mothers and nurturers.

☙ *Chapter Four* ❧
Gender Hierarchy

Chapter Three illustrated how the success of one of the most thriving Buddhist groups in Taiwan can be connected to its emphasis on canonical femininity – a widely celebrated success that shows contributions of women to the religious and social sphere as generally appreciated.

Today, women act as abbesses, set up Buddhist organizations (be that with a secular focus on society or more religious aims), support and organize different Buddhist events and monasteries, give talks, conduct research, teach at schools, universities and Buddhist institutions, publish books, newspapers, articles and so on. Nuns are omnipresent in Taiwan – more so than monks as they outnumber them by 3-4:1 (Lu, 1997a: 2), and the image of female monastics is said to have improved greatly since the relocation of the Mainland Chinese clergy (Chern, 2000). At present, four nuns are considered among the beacons of the Buddha's teachings, such as Ven. Cheng-yen, or Ven. Shih Heng-ching (a philosophy professor at National Taiwan University). Four out of ten personalities voted to be the most outstanding personalities in contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan were women (Li, 2002). Correspondingly, Ven. Jingxin (president of the BAROC) believes the future of Buddhism in Taiwan to be in the hands of the nuns (DeVido, 2000). Hence Buddhist women in Taiwan have not only a plethora of choices when it comes to their personal religious path. They are also celebrated for their particular contributions and are considered essential for the future survival of Buddhism in Taiwan.

Correspondingly, interlocutors from all walks of life stated, "Taiwanese Buddhism does not have a gender problem. Look at the number of nuns. Their status is high," with respect to this research. In a similar way, scholars laud the high status of nuns in contemporary

Buddhism in Taiwan (Tsomo, 1999b; Zhang and Lin, n.d.). It is certainly high in comparison with that of (semi-) ordained female practitioners in various other countries, such as the Maechis in Thailand, or Anis of the Tibetan tradition, where women are often not allowed to decide about, or preside over their own religious affairs.[1]

However, status is contextual. Although the status of Taiwanese nuns is high in comparison with that of other Buddhist cultures (of which some give little credence to female practitioners, or do not offer full ordination for women), when compared with Taiwanese monks, their status does not compare so well as certain advocates would have it (Zhang and Lin, n.d.: 2, 15, 17).[2] The present status of nuns is unquestionably much higher than it was in the past, owing to the effort of a large number of women (and men) who dedicated their lives to the advancement of the nuns' community and to the significant contributions of numerous individual nuns (Jones, 1999: 51ff). Even so, this change of status was equally determined by changing attitudes toward women in Taiwanese society in general (Zhang and Lin, n.d.: 22; Lu, 1991).

Despite the strong presence of, and ostensibly altered attitude toward nuns in Taiwanese Buddhism (Chern, 2000), women's spiritual and religious potential is primarily acknowledged if they comply with androcentrism. In fact, the investigation of "women's status" appears rather one-sided, conveying but one facet of the lives, practices and beliefs of Buddhist women. Instead, it seems that "women's status" is a constituent of male hegemonic discourse that does *not* reflect the ideals, views and aims of *all* women, as "status" is only reserved for *some*. An improvement of status surely contributes to the

[1] Above all: Tenzin, 2000, and Tsomo, 1999b: 51; but also: Bartholomeusz, 1994; Kabilsingh, 1991; Salgado, 1996; Barnes, 1996; Tsomo, 1988, 1999a; Van Esterik, 1982a. Further, Gutschow, 2000; Willis, 1999.

[2] When discussing gender issues with Taiwanese monastics, they generally resorted to comparing their own tradition with the Tibetan tradition so as to elevate the reputation of their own institutions. Men in particular rarely discussed deficiencies of their own tradition. Other traditions certainly face bigger obstacles in the investiture of nuns and attaining gender equality, but that does not automatically nullify gender hierarchy in Buddhism in Taiwan.

self-esteem, or self-confidence of women, but by itself it proves little more than female entrance into male hegemony. What is construed as status is just one aspect of gendered hierarchies. Further, one should differentiate between the status of nuns in society generally, where the clergy, as spiritual guides, always has a superior position vis-à-vis the laity, and their status within the clergy itself – in comparison with that of the monks.

A distinctively different view of gender relations emerges when the status of nuns is considered in a monastic context. What is more, the arguably relatively high status of Taiwanese nuns vis-à-vis that of nuns in other traditions and laywomen in Taiwanese society does not necessarily imply confidence in women's spiritual potential, nor does an increased status and presence of nuns in comparison with that of the past bespeak of more trust in their religious competence. The present state is perhaps a transition from a former inequality to a potential equality, and structural improvements, such as an increase of formal status, precede doctrinal and mental transformations. Be that as it may, at this point in time, Taiwanese gender relations in Buddhism are not as benign as they appear on the surface.

> Shi Xiao: "On the outside, Taiwanese Buddhism seems egalitarian, but if you look closely, you will find that in mixed temples, nuns always act as servants to monks. It is men who become abbots because due to the rules in the *Vinaya*, women cannot ordain men. Even if there are two spiritual leaders in a monastery, the male will practice and give talks while the female will do office or kitchen work. Otherwise, the population wouldn't support the monastery. And if you ask nuns whether they think that they can attain the highest goal in this life, you commonly get the answer that it doesn't matter. Just let the abbot attain the highest goal, and everything will be fine."[3]
>
> Ms Gao first states that there is equality in Buddhism, and that her master has always treated her the same way he treated men. However, several days later, she recalls an incident where she was scolded by a nun for not sticking together against males. This

[3] Discussion with Shi Xiao (a *bhiksuni*) at Academia Sinicia, Institute of Ethnology, 11.10.2002. A Western Buddhist nun of the Tibetan order made a similar statement. She argued that one should just follow one's teacher. Since *he* is sure to attain awakening, there is no need to worry (Canberra, 17.04.2003). Taiwanese Buddhist women are thus not the only ones who believe it to be more important to ensure the attainment of awakening of the (male) teacher rather than attaining liberation themselves. Many aspects observed in Taiwan therefore equally surface in other Buddhist cultures, including the West. This question deserves a study in its own right, especially in the context of dependence theories and the continuance of gendered habitual patterns.

was the first time where she observed a tension between the sexes in the clergy.[4]

Many of the facets of gender hierarchy discussed here are entrenched in patriarchal structures, and embedded in the context of traditional Buddhism. They are by no means unique to Taiwan. Many can be noticed among Western Buddhists, and in worse manifestations among Buddhists of other traditions. This chapter, by focusing on Taiwan, is an initial attempt to raise awareness that even in Buddhism, "the phantasm of patriarchy, that pyramid of male power, permeates the entire culture, imparting warped subjectivity. To participate uncritically in such culture is to remain alienated from the self in a sense of false consciousness" (White, 1995: 89). While not everybody participates uncritically, significantly, mainly interlocutors who were outsiders, or who fared well in contemporary Buddhism (abbesses of prestigious temples) expressly criticized current Buddhist gender hierarchy. Only a few women openly critiqued current views. Not a single man did. The reader is enjoined to judge for themselves whether the following statement holds for Buddhism in Taiwan.

> Much of the institutionalized world is constituted by patterns of ego that rely on gender to pigeonhole the world. Stereotypically, males are thought to be more "spiritual" and able to develop calmness and tranquility, even though male anatomy itself seems to war against these qualities. In every realm, secular and spiritual, men have precedence and dominance over women [...] the preference of maleness extends to the next life. All these practices of gender hierarchy and gender privilege encourage a clinging to male ego; they do not encourage egolessness. Thus Buddhist institutions promote one of the more painful and pervasive manifestations of ego (Gross, 1999: 90).

This chapter first discusses structural androcentrism and articulated sexism, where female rebirth is primarily considered to result from negative karma, or alternatively, from the choice of an awakened person to help sentient beings (a dualism hitherto unnoticed). One of these awakened manifestations is Guanyin, whose gender can be established as essentially male even though previously assumed to be female. After describing ritualized

[4] Conversations, Taipei, 21.10/24.10.2001.

gender hierarchy, this chapter elucidates paternalistic rhetoric as a manifestation of incongruent argumentation.

Structural Androcentrism

As analyzed in Chapter Two, both Mahāyāna Buddhism *and* Chinese culture espouse beliefs in sexual transformation, and *both* value the transformation of women into men, but not *vice versa*. This is a sign of androcentrism. This androcentrism comes to light in several aspects of Buddhist beliefs and Chinese culture, but in particular in spoken Chinese, where the human and male norm is collapsed in the everyday use of language.[5] In the same way as spoken Chinese collapses the male *ta* 他 and female *ta* 她 pronoun into a single pronoun *ta*, a unisex pronoun for the third person, Taiwanese Buddhist terms of address often ignore specific female forms. In a recent paper on Tzu-chi, a female writer used the male pronoun *ta* 他 for Ven. Cheng-yen throughout the entire text, even though the topic of her analysis concerns questions of gender (Lu, 1997b). Similarly, a lecture on Tzu-chi (Zhang, 2000) fully ignored the fact that Ven. Cheng-yen is a woman.

Ta is not the only instance of linguistic androcentrism. Names of the ordained sangha in general are unisex (Günzel, 1998: 40; Tsung, 1978: 299). Nuns, but also laypeople address each other as 師兄 *shixiong* ("dharma brother") (Zhang and Lin, n.d: 14; Yeshe, 2003b). The term *shixiong* has a female counterpart 師姐 *shijie* ("dharma sister"), which seems to be used less frequently, and never among nuns. The clergy address each other as *shixiong* or 戒兄 *jiexiong* ("precepts brother"), no matter whether they are male or female.[6] The conflation of *ta* can be traced back to Classical Chinese, where the term simply designated a third person pronoun. *Shixiong*, by contrast, is a more androcentric word, as the second

[5] Gross defines androcentrism as the collapsing of the male and human (Gross 1994: 331; see also: 1977).
[6] That 釋恒清 refers to this matter indicates that Taiwanese Buddhist clergy also notes this androcentric tendency (Shih 1995: 1).

character, *xiong*, is a kinship term denoting "elder brother". *Shixiong* therefore explicitly connotes masculinity and hierarchy. The same applies to the respectful form of address for ordained sangha. Women and men are addressed as 師父 *shifu* ("master"), also an explicitly male term, as *fu* is a composite of the contemporary word for "father". So is the term for senior monastics 師伯 *shibo* ("senior"), where *bo* stands for "uncle". The same holds for the term for the teachers of abbesses (and abbots), 師公 *shigong* ("patriarch"), where *gong* in the secular realm stands for "grandfather", and ancestors more generally.

Monastic appellation is therefore entirely based on masculine kinship terms. In this way, women have to conform to 'symbolic androcentrism'. A male interlocutor, Dr Shu, when asked whether women have to transform into men to attain awakening, argued: "of course, the Buddha was a man, he begot a son. Women have to become like men. Just look at monastics, the moment women shave their heads, they cease to be women. They are no longer addressed as female, but with the term *shifu/xiong*, a masculine term. They are no longer women."[7] Thus even lay Buddhists recognize how Buddhist monastic circles linguistically eliminate femininity.

Undoubtedly, symbolic androcentrism marks Chinese Buddhist terminology. Gross argues that seemingly sex-neutral language is in fact androcentric. It considers masculinity the norm. "They [women] are supposedly given the opportunity to match the norm, but the norm is collapsed into the male ideal [...] the ideal spiritual person is male" (Gross, 1993: 178). The data discussed above unmistakably corroborates this statement.

Even so, while Blofeld (1975: 57) observed that only men were addressed with the title 法師 *fashi* ("dharma master") in the 1940s, Zhang and Lin (n.d: 17) argue that today, nuns and monks are called *fashi*. But though ostensibly unisex, *fashi* nonetheless connotes masculinity. The change of the usage of *fashi* testifies to a change in gendered hierarchy and

[7] Interview with a Chinese medical practitioner, 27.12.2002.

to a greater appreciation of female teachers. Hence, Zhang and Lin (n.d.) maintain, women have the same status as men, a somewhat simplistic celebration. They disregard that mostly men act in the position of *fashi*. Furthermore, the apparently unisex term does not obliterate gender. Instead, *shi*, used in all appellations, implies masculinity as it invokes a male image. Moreover, when female and male monastics assemble, monks are distinguished from nuns by the title 大法師 *dafashi* ("great /eminent dharma master").

During the ordination period, *all* female ordination witnesses, including the preceptors, held the title *fashi*.[8] Five male witnesses and the three male preceptors had the title 長老 *zhanglao* ("elder") while the rest of the male witnesses held the title *dafashi*. The tree female preceptors, by contrast, held the title *fashi*. In this way, the appellation of monastics during the ordination period signaled the superior position of the monks. *Only* the *position* of the female preceptor – as opposed to the (personal) title – equaled that of the monks: *heshang* 和尚. But then, it was designated as female 和尚尼 *heshangni* ("female *upaya*"). Why, at the very apex of the power structure, was it necessary to re-inscribe the female sex? Does this re-inscription of femininity at the top of the monastic hierarchy aim at relegating them to an inferior position vis-à-vis monks?

Articulated Sexism

Not only structural androcentrism can be observed in Taiwan. Articulated sexism is similarly pervasive, reflecting rather negative attitudes toward women practitioners.

During the Triple Platform Ordination, Shi Chang exclaimed, "It's fair that they're tougher on the boys now, for they'll have it much easier later on."[9] I asked her what she

[8] Full ordination requires a specific number of ordination witnesses, who themselves must have been fully ordained for a prescribed number of years (ten for monks, twelve for nuns).

[9] The rooms of the male ordinands were in a separate area, the men were thus easier to control than the women. Because there was a much larger number of female ordinands, they were fairly spread out. The men always walked into the shrine room as a group while the women entered in a more chaotic fashion. Shi Chang

meant by that. "You know, sexism. Taiwanese Buddhism is sexist." She refused to comment any further. She had obviously noticed a certain hierarchy in Taiwanese Buddhism that prompted this extemporaneous statement, but she was unwilling to pursue this line of thinking. In a similar way to Shi Chang, Ms Lin stated:

> Ms Lin: "It's hopeless to be a woman in Taiwan. The moment you're born female, you're inferior. The whole culture works that way, indoctrinating inferiority. If you engage in business, and you're ugly, people won't like you, and if you're pretty, they talk about you, too. No matter what you do as a woman, you can never get it right. If you behave like a man, they will say, "look how masculine she is", and if you're feminine they don't like it either. The same holds for Taiwanese Buddhism. This kind of thinking is just as entrenched in Buddhism. For example, when our abbess organizes Dharma meetings that liberate sentient beings she cannot do one specific part. She says sūtras prohibit women from conducting this particular ritual, hence she has to invite monks to do it, and pay them for their service. Because our abbess has had financial difficulties lately, she has been unable to pay for them, so we have not been able to conduct this kind of ceremony for quite some time."[10]

The same abbess, when she set up a particularly big temple complex was approached by high clerics of two significant Taiwanese Buddhist enterprises. First, they offered their help as the required funds were beyond her means. When she resisted and refused to sell parts of the project to the monks, they insulted her by saying, "Who do you think you are? You're just a *bhiksunī*. A woman cannot accomplish such a big feat." She stood firm, and the section the monks wanted to buy has already been completed. Still, her experience shows the limited trust in women's potential and the way in which eminent monks rebuked her on account of her womanhood.

When casually chatting after an interview, Shi Wu reasoned that life is much harsher for *bhiksunīs* because they are not given the same amount of offerings as monks, so it is much more difficult for them to survive, to establish temples and so on.[11]

These interlocutors were well aware of the sexist tune which keeps humming in

made the above statement with respect to this situation.

[10] Conversation, 24.12.2002.

[11] Interview, 11.01.2003.

Taiwanese Buddhism. Yet several interlocutors, when specifically asked, "Do you think that there is gender inequality in Buddhism", replied "No". Most interlocutors did not think discrimination against women existed in Buddhism. Nonetheless, many espoused and some propagated negative views of women. Feminists in the West would probably label some of the views they had internalized as androcentric and sexist. Male hegemony evidently permeated their views, even if they were unwilling to acknowledge this at first. Some interlocutors posited: "The Buddha could not possibly have made statements that denigrate women. If he did, he must have had a good reason to do so." Shi Wu and Ms Yü, for instance, argued that because China was a patriarchal society, women came to be largely excluded from Buddhism, which would not have been the case had China been a matriarchal culture.[12] Hence inequality, if acknowledged, was in this instance attributed to Chinese cultural influences rather than Buddhism *per se*.

Encouraging her son to take ordination, Ms Zhong pointed at me, saying: "See, *even* Ani, a woman, can be ordained. She's a woman and *yet* she can do it (emphasis hers)."[13] In this conversation, being a man was clearly used to affirm the capacity of the son to become a monk if *even* a Western woman can be ordained, suggesting that women are deemed less capable of spiritual cultivation. Such views are held and propagated by women. Indeed, numerous scholars have argued that women are the main perpetrators of such views (Cole, 1998; Seaman, 1981; Wolf, 1972; Yeshe, 2003b).

The majority of respondents to the questionnaire affirmed women's ability to attain Buddhahood: 85.9% of the female and 91.7% of the male respondents. Correspondingly, only 18% of the female and 14% of the male respondents thought the spiritual potential to attain Buddhahood between the two sexes differed. This reveals a fairly homogenous and

[12] Interview, 11.01.2003.
[13] Conversation, 27.12.2002.

positive attitude toward female spiritual potential. However, the questionnaire did not inquire as to *how* women attain Buddhahood, and a number of respondents expressly indicated that women must transform into men prior to their attainment of Buddhahood.

Interviews and participant observation, on the other hand, imparted a very different impression to the questionnaire responses. A painter of Buddhist images in his sixties, Mr Chen, when asked whether women can attain awakening, said, "there is *no* way that women can attain awakening. According to sūtras, women are 500 years behind men in terms of spiritual development. So they first have to practice to be reborn as men, and then they can attain Buddhahood." "Why?" "Because they have more defilements, and their bodies are dirty. You know, the monthly inconvenience of menstruation, the blood, pain, and so on." He neither remembered which sūtra discussed such matters, nor did he remember exactly who taught him. He said that, "*shifus* say so." "Male or female ones?" "Probably both." This conversation occurred in the presence of Abbess B., who had instigated the discussion, surrounded by a number of her disciples, some of whom were male. A moment of silence followed after his statement. He apologetically argued that sūtras and other teachers espouse such views.[14]

The Dualistic Nature of Female Rebirth

There is the strong belief among Buddhists in Taiwan that women are born as women due to their negative karma, condemning ordinary women simply for being female. This concept is by no means unique to Taiwanese Buddhism – it is widespread in Asian Buddhism, confirmed by many scholars through archival and field data. In Taiwan, most nuns I spoke to during the Triple Platform Ordination, and most interlocutors during casual conversations had internalized the statements that women are more defiled, have more

[14] Conversation, Taipei City, 27.12.2002.

attachment, and that their negative karmic propensities are deeper than those of men. Most interlocutors did not know where these beliefs originated. It was common knowledge in Taiwan, they said.

According to Barnes (1987: 118), this view stems from later Buddhist treatises, as it does not seem to appear in early sūtras, and Gross (1991) maintains that this belief quite possibly has its origin in two important Mahāyāna texts, the *Abidharmakośa* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi.* And so, Buddhists in Taiwan still adhere to views that consider "females [as] females because they have not advanced as far spiritually as males. Being born male is the visible demonstration of one's moral and spiritual superiority" (Barnes, 1987: 118). Male rebirth as a sign of inherent superiority also emerged in an interview with Ms Tang, a Buddhist in her sixties, who asserted women's defilements to be heavier than those of men. She chose the example of a friend who gets beaten up by her husband, arguing this verified the heaviness of *her* negative propensities! Likewise, she thought that women have to bring up children due to heavier karma. Acknowledging the numerical predominance of women at religious gatherings, she nonetheless reiterated women's mental afflictions to weigh heavier than those of men.[15]

The only strident disagreement with this view came from two abbesses. "In Taiwan, people say that women are more defiled than men, but that's wrong. There is absolutely no basis for such a statement," Abbess A. said during a lecture on the *Vinaya.*[16] Likewise, Abbess B. reasoned: "I don't know where people get the idea from that women are more defiled, or that they can't make it in their female bodies. I don't believe it."[17] Evidently, not everybody concurs with such views, though among interlocutors and friends, mainly self-confident women questioned them:

[15] Interview, 15.01.2003.
[16] During the Triple Platform Ordination.
[17] Interview, 13.12.2002.

Q: "Do you think that men are better practitioners than women? Have you heard this statement before?"
Ms Wen: "Yes, a man has been practicing for 500 years more than a woman, they say. But I don't think so ... because I can't see why they should be [better], I think being a woman is also good – there is nothing bad about it, if one is diligent then that's okay, too [as a woman]."
Q: "What do you think about the saying that women's mental afflictions are heavier?"
Ms Wen: "I don't think so."
Q: "Have you heard others saying this?"
Ms Wen: "Yes, some people say so, but I don't think that way."[18]

Ms Wen was one of the few lay individuals who disagreed with these interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, but she did know about them and confirmed them to be widespread. She is the student of Abbess A., and has traveled quite extensively to, and lived in, several Asian countries. The statements of three other, rather self-confident and self-reliant women from Taipei city, echo Ms Wen's attitude:

Q: "Have you heard the saying that women's defilements are heavier than those of men?"
B: "I heard people in the past saying so. They said that men are 500 years ahead in their spiritual cultivation in comparison with women, only then they could become men. Is that what you mean?"
Q: "I don't know, I'm asking you."
A: "I haven't ever kept this in my mind. I think practice is a personal matter... all one has to do is to change oneself in everyday life..."
Q: "And you?"
C: "To be a woman is to say that they have more afflictions, but one also needs to consider the karma due to the practice in her previous lives."
Q: "So do you think that women have more defilements?"
B: "No, the amount depends on the practice of the previous life..."
Q: "How about you?"
A: "Why should women have more afflictions?"
Q: "I don't know, I'm asking you."
C: "The female mind is more detailed [fine], in particular after marriage and when one is a mother, whether or not. One has to help the children. Can't let go. That's one of them, right? That's why we're more defiled."[19]

During the entire interview, interlocutors A and B had a much more egalitarian attitude toward gender than the third woman C. Interlocutors A and B were single parents

[18] Interview, 16.01.2003.
[19] Interview, 17.01.2003.

and gave the impression of being rather self-confident women. They emphasized how they enjoy their freedom, that they can go wherever they choose to, and that no man obstructs their spiritual practice. The third interlocutor, however, argued in many cases along more traditional lines, and because she spoke very softly, many of her answers are not recorded in full detail. She connected child bearing and upbringing as the cause for more mental afflictions. Interlocutor C, however, first asserted women to have more defilements than men and only when asked again elaborated on the influence of previous lives.

Although they had not internalized the dictum of "women being 500 years behind in their spiritual cultivation", they did, like Mr Chen and Ms Wen, acknowledge the existence of this belief, also illustrated in the following interview:

> Ms Yü: "According to Buddhism, men become men due to their merit, ... but whether one achieves more attainments due to male rebirth, I don't know... Being female apparently means that one has committed many wrong deeds..."
> Shi Wu: "...The *Huayan Sūtra* states that men have practiced for 500 years more than women. In order to become a *bhiksu*, one first has to be a *bhiksunī*, it says in there, so there are several reasons."[20]

The *Huayan Sūtra (Avatamska Sūtra)* is recited on a daily basis by adherents of *Huayan* Buddhism, but is also studied and recited by other practitioners.[21] The interview shows how interlocutors argued on account of (presumed) sections in sūtras that women are worse practitioners than men. Because sūtras are believed to promulgate such views, interlocutors rarely questioned their truthfulness; hence people incorporate views (that are believed to stem) from sūtras into their worldviews, which graphically illustrates the importance of the understanding and interpretation of scriptures for the formation of attitudes concerning gender. Elsewhere, Shi Wu also referred to sūtras to establish her answers not as her beliefs, but as the authentic teachings of the Buddha, which illustrates

[20] Interview, 11.01.2003.
[21] Abbess B held it to be the all-encompassing text that maps out the entire path to awakening. She claimed it to be similar to the *Mahāmudrā* teachings in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

the close connection between legitimating contemporary beliefs and practices through scriptures. Since negative attitudes toward women are attributed to authentic Buddhist teachings, they cannot be questioned.

The relation between Buddhist practice, the recitation of sūtras (a widespread form of formal spiritual cultivation in Buddhism in Taiwan), and prevailing gender attitudes is therefore vital. Thus combining historical and archival research with ethnographic investigation is crucial as interlocutors themselves draw on passages and stories from sūtras to explain their worldview, to justify gender equality as well as inequality. No matter whether "their" excerpts or stories truly stem from scriptures, interlocutors nevertheless assumed them to be authentically Buddhist. The three interlocutors from Taipei city unequivocally described how they realize the validity of the Buddha's teachings whenever they encounter certain situations and apply methods expounded in sūtras, or they *then* understand the meaning of the sūtra they recite. The recitation of sūtras therefore has a critical bearing on Buddhists' views (of gender).

The connection between scripture, belief and practice is also self-evident in the following example. When asked about the theory that female rebirth is a result of negative karma, Shi Wu declared, "There are two reasons (for female rebirth). One is having fallen (morally). The other is having made the aspiration to be reborn as a *bhiksunī*."[22] She based her argument on the *Lotus Sūtra*, where Guanyin appears in any required form to alleviate the suffering of beings (Canpary, 1996: 83). Further, it is in the *Lotus Sūtra* where a *nāga*-girl transforms into a Bodhisattva, and proclaims: "Born with the shape of a female body, I can understand the suffering of women [...] I shall guide women to the path of enlightenment" (Ueki, 2001: 74). The statement of Shi Wu in reference to the *Lotus Sūtra* leaves no doubt regarding the intimate connection between scripture and belief. At the same time, it reveals

[22] Interview, 11.01.2003.

a coexistence of two explanations for female rebirth.

Most interlocutors maintained women were reborn as women either due to their negative karma, for good karma, they claimed, leads to male rebirth, *or* because they deliberately choose a female form to benefit sentient beings. This strategy explains the existence of extraordinary female practitioners in a system that accentuates the alleged inherent inferiority and defilement of womankind. Chapter Three revealed how many interlocutors considered Ven. Cheng-yen as an emanation of Guanyin. Similarly, several interlocutors claimed that their female teacher had been reborn as a woman because of choice, or that they never quite resembled women anyway since they "didn't have that femininity". And so, in Buddhist beliefs in Taiwan, as in most world religions, female embodiment is constructed around two diametrically opposed poles. However, these poles do not so much juxtapose the maternal and the polluted, as many scholars have argued in the past,[23] but the preciously pure and the utterly defiled.

Several interlocutors considered their female teacher as an exceptional example of the manifestation of enlightened compassion, yet nobody claimed this for men.[24] Maybe, the deification process is amplified for women because in elevating a handful of women to the status of divine beings, ordinary womankind remains locked in its subaltern position with regard to spirituality. Further, exalting a woman to the status of a Bodhisattva who achieves more than a man, or is equal to him, simultaneously raises the status of men with similar achievements to her (exalted) level. This reveals a limited trust in women's (spiritual) potential, for if a woman does succeed, she is considered extremely special, and cannot possibly have the identity of an ordinary woman. Therefore, elevating a few outstanding

[23] See Nefsky (1995: 292) for details, but also implicit in Cole, 1998; Sangren, 1983; and many others.

[24] Perhaps because I had been unaware of this difference while in Taiwan. This aspect only occurred to me when translating the interviews. In retrospect, I cannot remember having *ever* heard interlocutors referring to a male teacher as the incarnation of a Bodhisattva. There seems to be simply no need to argue for the special spiritual status or potential of a man in the way it has to be proven for women.

women paradoxically places most women in an inferior spiritual position. This tactic is an ostensibly ingenious mechanism confining women to subaltern positions. Nevertheless, it can be used to the advantage of individual women who may exploit the belief in their divinity to legitimate, or enhance their status.

One of my interlocutors was certainly considered such an exceptional women. Many of her disciples believed her to be a full-fledged Bodhisattva. After an interview, Abbess B decided to make a concluding statement, and asked that the recorder to be switched back on. She referred back to a conversation we had one late night where she gave much more precise answers, but which was unfortunately not recorded. Here, winding up, she stated:

> Abbess B: "Many Bodhisattvas are reborn as humans because they have made the aspiration [to do so] while the other sort of humans are those who are caught in the cycle of rebirth, in the six realms. But when those Bodhisattvas come back, they do so in the way the Guanyin chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra* describes. When a female body is required to liberate [others], Guanyin appears in a female body. Consequently, one shouldn't restrict the topic to the question as to whether women can attain Buddhahood, or whether women have to transform into men to do so... I think it should be clearly stated that an aspiring Bodhisattva, when s/he appear as a human, if a female body is required to liberate [others, Guanyin] appears as a woman [...]:"[25]

Abbess B, the most critical and outspoken interlocutor, thought this notion important enough to specifically comment on it, thereby providing a concluding (recorded) statement to our discussion of gender issues in Taiwanese Buddhism. She accepted, and evidently promulgated, the conception of female rebirth as going down two paths. In her case, this belief was used in casual conversations to establish her own superiority vis-à-vis other women. This belief is thus not purely espoused or promulgated by men. Rather, women equally accept this hegemonic evaluation of female embodiment, perhaps because some women employ it to their advantage. Faure (2003: 1, also 8) argued, "women were divided, not only due to their own separate agenda, but also as a result of male domination". The belief in female rebirth as either due to negative karmic retribution, or as a conscious

[25] Interview, 16.01.2003.

choice clearly divides women by demoting most while elevating some. Today, as in the past, the elevated ones still demote the rest: "Women can in some cases be their own worst enemies [...] it is difficult join the chorus of praising "eminent nuns", when the latter seem to weaken women's cause by relentlessly inscribing themselves into male structures, disguising their voice by speaking alien tongues, or even seem to disparage ordinary womanhood and sexuality" (Faure, 2003: 53). Nevertheless, although many consider women more defiled and thus treading behind men in their spiritual cultivation, the existence of outstanding women practitioners is acknowledged. They are, however, not considered ordinary women. Because they are reborn males who have consciously chosen to appear in a female form, they are not really females, but males in female disguise – for the benefit of sentient beings.

Ms Yü referred to a girl who wanted to be ordained when she was a small child. Arguing that this girl must have been a practitioner in her previous life to be able to retain the aspiration to live as a monastic in the present life, Ms Yü still thought that the girl must nonetheless have committed some serious offence in her last life to have been reborn female. Hence, although the girl was able to practice Buddhism from the tender age of one, Ms Yü considered her to be liable to negative karma on account of her female rebirth. She did not propose this girl to be an emanation of Guanyin, or a reincarnate teacher. A female person must first *prove* that she was not reborn due to negative karma, before she might be considered an incarnate Bodhisattva.

The Gender of Guanyin

Keyes (1984) analyzes how images of salvation differ for men and women. Guanyin, the Chinese form of *Avalokiteśvara*, the embodiment of compassion, has been argued to be

female.[26] In Chinese Buddhism, the masculine would seem not to be the only paradigm for spiritual cultivation, since a feminine counterpart is present in Guanyin (Chamberlayne, 1962: 48; Paul, 1985; Yü 1990, 1996, 2001b; and many others). But as Cabeźon (1992b: 181) argues, "the presence of female symbolism in and of itself, is no guarantee of enlightened attitudes toward women". Moreover, although interlocutors principally claimed nuns to be manifestations of Guanyin, they did not appear to emulate a specifically feminine ideal, as interlocutors did not deem Guanyin female or feminine. Instead, they considered Guanyin either androgynous, or as a male who has assumed a female form – echoing the above theory about the dual nature of female rebirth.

Since interlocutors judged Guanyin as neither female nor feminine, it is wrong to deduce that the apparent feminine form of Guanyin presents an alternative role model for women in Buddhism. Quite the contrary, Levering and Yü show representations of Guanyin in Buddhist temples to differ drastically from those in folk or Daoist temples. Whereas feminine representations of Guanyin feature in the latter, Buddhist temples are more likely to depict androgynous, or masculine forms (Levering, 1997: 138-139). Yü explicitly states, "[...] the orthodox Buddhist clergy has refused to acknowledge Guanyin as feminine [...] even after Guanyin became feminized, some still regarded the Bodhisattva as masculine" (Yü, 2001b: 6). This renders previous interpretations of Guanyin as feminine inaccurate. Guanyin was and is sometimes imagined as masculine, and sometimes as feminine, depending on the specific context.

Accordingly, when positing that one does not need to be male to attain awakening, and that Guanyin is an eminent example of a female awakened being during conversations and interviews, interlocutors either considered Guanyin not as a woman, but as a man who *appears* as a woman, or portrayed Guanyin as asexual, yet masculine. This finding contradicts

[26] See also Kirsch, 1982 and 1985.

earlier research, which hoped to find a feminine role model in Guanyin in the Chinese Buddhist tradition (Boucher, 1999; Paul, 1985). Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that even when represented in a feminine form, Guanyin is still imagined in the context of traditional femininity (as nurturing mother) – in the case of popular religion. And so, although Guanyin may appear feminine to Western observers, my Taiwanese Buddhist interlocutors did not share this perception. Consequently, we must refrain from universalizing Guanyin in terms of a singular paradigm, and from essentializing Guanyin as feminine or female. Instead, it should be recognized that several models of Guanyin coexist in Chinese culture. Guanyin's gender changes with different contexts. This observation concurs with the following observation:

> There are practically no female Buddhas, and even if Buddhahood is predicted for a woman and no sex change is explicitly mentioned, the goal remains very distant and does not necessarily translate into the concrete image of a female Buddha. Furthermore, when a Bodhisattva assumes a female disguise, it is usually a skilful means to convert people, and his feminization remains limited in its practical effects on the status of women (Faure, 2003: 104).

In short, since even Guanyin can no longer be considered a female or feminine role model for Buddhist women, in all probability, *no* specifically female, or feminine awakened ideal is emphasized in the Taiwanese Buddhist pantheon.[27]

> Shi Wu: "[...] because most *bhiksunīs* have a rather loving mind, they are quite good at taking care of people, just like our master..."
> Q: "The *bhiksus* aren't?"
> Shi Wu: "The *bhiksus* first attain liberation. Most will die rather early (to attain) liberation. Then they come back to benefit sentient beings. But if you look at ordinary *bhiksunīs*, they will not first (seek) their own liberation. The moment they accept the suffering of sentient beings, they want to benefit them. ... Why does [Guanyin] appear as a woman? Because women are quite good at getting close to men and women. As for men, it is not that easy for them to get close to women..."
> Q: "Do you think that men have more desire?"
> Shi Wu: "Yes. Those who are not Buddhists."
> Q: "How about monastics?"
> Shi Wu: "A monk has few desires... if he has realized the reason for his homeless life; that is, to understand life and death, cut defilements and benefit sentient beings, then

[27] Faure (1998: 243), for example, argues that Chan Buddhism in particular did value femininity positively, yet none of my interlocutors referred to *Śrīmālādevī* as a female role model, or Buddha.

most desires can be reduced to almost nothing. Therefore, why are men good at ethics? Because they are quite pure. Not like us women, (who are) fine/weak. The female thinking is very complex and with regard to the non-substantial, rather complicated. A good practitioner..."
Q: "Are there women like this?"
Shi Wu: "Some, but few, particularly not if they were married before they were ordained. That is not to say that there are none. Let me make a comparison: In general, the accomplished ones you can meet are still ... Why are all those who attained Buddhahood male? Because at a certain level, are still ... that's all been recorded, there are really only few women (but) many men. ... if you go down South to Foguangshan you will find that most women who lecture on sūtras can only expound the law of cause and effect. They don't have the capacity to teach in great detail."
Q: "What do you mean by that?"
Shi Wu: "Explaining the details. That is teaching up to a deeper level of humanity, analyzing a bit deeper... There is one exception in Taiwan, however... Why are women not as good as men in liberating (themselves)? Because they have the 84 habitual patterns."[28]

Many women simply accepted the cultural premise of *their* inherent negativity, evidenced *alone* by their female rebirth. While a Western Buddhist might interpret aspects of the interview cited above, such as the women's enhanced intention to help sentient beings, to be an advantage and sign of superior ethical capacity, Shi Wu proposed quite a different interpretation. This is similar to Ms Tang, who considered the fact that her friend is usually beaten up by her husband as the proof for the heaviness of women's mental afflictions, or negative karma. Further, that men preeminently strive for their own awakening, Shi Wu interpreted as a sign of their superior spiritual potential and not as a sign of selfishness.

Shi Wu's comments elucidate a number of issues: Men's superior spiritual potential is signaled by the small number of women who have been recorded as having attained awakening. Further, only monks lecture on the intricacies of sūtras, which reveals to her the intellectual inferiority of nuns. She does not consider the possibility that gender bias may prohibit nuns from lecturing on certain topics, as Shi Xiao argued during a conversation at Academia Sinica and Zhang and Lin (n.d) discuss in detail. Moreover, Shi Wu deems men more pure, and women more complicated in their thinking. In her view, Guanyin appears as

[28] Interview, 11.01.2003. The argumentative loops and ellipses, indicated by ... were made by the interlocutor.

a woman in order to get close to sentient beings, which would be difficult, would Guanyin appear as a man. She does not consider this as an advantage of female rebirth.

The Decline of the Dharma and Negative Karmic Propensities

Significantly more women attend Buddhist gatherings, an argument to which Shi Wu responded that during the time of the decline of the Dharma, more women engage in spiritual practice than men. And so, the numerical predominance of women does not indicate that women are more dedicated and thus better practitioners, but that the Dharma is in the period of decline. (This view, stemming from apocryphal literature (Overmyer, 1991: 106), appears widespread among Buddhists today, further substantiating the significant influence of scriptures on beliefs.) No interlocutor thought this aspect to be a testimony to their spiritual prowess. On the contrary, "the fact that one is able to practice does not mean that one is able to reach attainment," maintained Shi Wu. She described female practitioners as practicing blindly and reciting blindly. Hence, even if they engage in dedicated formal spiritual practice, this is considered a sign of spiritual inferiority. Correspondingly, many interlocutors stigmatized Taiwanese women as having more obstacles to spiritual practice, and thus their daily practice as being less efficacious.

> Shi Wu: "I think that women's jealousy and arrogance is quite heavy."
> Ms Yü: "What's that? Arrogance, pride. The jealous mind and the arrogant mind? That's right, one can say so. Women surely have more mental creations of jealousy, as for arrogance ... I don't think so."[29]

Attachment, jealousy, desire and emotionality were generally singled out as important obstacles for women's practice. So was the fact that women rarely directly state their opinions. Shi Wu thought it was important to be direct and objective, characteristics other interlocutors attributed to men rather than women. Only when asked directly did they

[29] Interview, 11.01.2003.

contemplate the obstacles men face in practice. Foremost, arrogance was deemed an obstacle for men. Levering made a similar observation about gendered obstacles to practice: "it was clear that the Buddhist women I spoke with thought that there were important differences in the male and female body, in the balance of emotion and reason in men and women and so forth – differences that affect the ease of progress in Buddhist practice" (Levering, 1991: 224).

Correspondingly, most interlocutors believed that because women's practice is not as good as that of men, and because their negative karmic propensities are deeper than those of men, women could receive full ordination only once during their lifetime, and have to go through the process of receiving the vows twice within twenty-four hours, once from the *bhiksunīs*, and once from the *bhiksus*. They neither interpreted the dual ordination as a blessing, nor did they deem men's difficulty in maintaining chastity to be the reason why they are allowed to receive the vows up to seven times.[30] Similarly, they believed that women receive more vows because they are more defiled. Ms Yü, when asked whether men don't have mental afflictions, stated, "they also have some, but they have fewer vows." Several minutes later, she contemplated, "Buddhism says that you only become male if you have the required merit, and as for women ...women have many more vows.... I just know that taking birth as a female means that one has done a lot of wrong things."[31] Similarly, many interlocutors commonly equated the high number of vows with a larger number of defilements.

Quite a different interpretation was proposed during teachings on the *Bhiksunī Prātimoksa*: "Because women are actually able to keep the vows, because their conduct is

[30] This does, however, not imply that women do not face difficulties in observing celibacy. However, most of the rules related to celibacy in the *Dharmagupta Vinaya* were established as the consequence of the transgression of monks, perhaps simply because the monks' community was established first. See Footnote n.32 for further details.

[31] Interview, 11.01.2003.

pure, they could be given so many vows. Men wouldn't be able to keep them" – a view also espoused by Shi Yikong (2002). Nonetheless, most nuns I spoke to during the ordination period and most lay informants did not share this view.[32]

When encouraged to think about the advantage of being a woman for spiritual practice, interlocutors were almost at a loss for answers. Ms Yü referred to preferential treatment given to women ("ladies first"). Due to women's (physical) weakness, people are more likely to help, which she judged as a positive aspect of being a woman. When asked about the advantage of male rebirth on the other hand, Shi Wu gave a lengthy answer that mainly considered questions of security and convenience. By contrast, she listed women as having a harder time if they want to go into a retreat, and as being vulnerable to attacks if they go out on their own (and therefore nuns have to, in accordance with the *Vinaya*, leave the

[32] One Taiwanese nun in Kathmandu immediately retorted – when I told her the topic of my research – that women can only be ordained once and men seven times, upon which I exclaimed "that's unfair!" We both burst out in laughter. Generally, though, the fact that nuns can only be fully ordained once was seen as reflecting their inferiority, and not as ensuring that they disrobe less frequently. Several nuns (in papers presented at the Sakyadhita Conference) thought women to be more likely to remain as nuns than men. The reasons provided for this were usually one of the following: women are spiritually more inclined than men, they are more capable of living in a community (despite a large number of vows which bespeak of the contrary – namely, a disposition to quarreling), are less egocentric, and have less (sexual) desire. Quite possibly, however, men disrobe in higher numbers not primarily because of their sexual desire or egotism alone (as opposed to the socially construed selfless and chaste nuns), but also because they can request full ordination up to seven times. If we judge on the basis of the *Vinaya* and popular plays of the 19th and 20th century in China, nuns were considered more prone to lose themselves in "romantic speculations" (as opposed to threatening sexual adventures – see Goldman, 2001 and Sommer, 2002). Maybe for this reasons, the vows relating to the interaction between the sexes are stricter for nuns than for monks. After all, they can only receive full ordination once, so better protect them from themselves – and charming men! Another – less cynical and more credible – line of reasoning comes to mind: As discussed in Chapter Two, questions relating to chastity are strongly shaped by the moral codes of the respective society. Firstly, vows relating to inter-sexual relations between nuns and laymen might have been influenced by a societal division of the public and domestic sphere, where women were relegated to the latter. In begging, nuns quite possibly intruded a sphere that was not yet prepared for them, and as such, their interaction with men might have required more rules and norms whereas the interaction between male ascetics and laywomen would have already been socially regulated, as male renunciants had clearly been part of the religious landscape before the time of the Buddha (unlike female renunciants – the first female renuciant order seems to have been introduced by Jainism). This is not to say that awkward situations between monks and laywomen did not happen. Quite the contrary, a number of stories depict such situations and lovesick monks. However, societal requirements might have precipitated the stricter interaction between nuns and laymen. I find the protection-argument alone, often invoked by monks, nuns and feminist Buddhists, unconvincing (that is, gendered socialization at the time might have focused more on women than men, hence nuns required more protection from men – thus the higher number of vows). As for the question of the number of possible ordinations: Perhaps, a nun who disrobed and subsequently had sexual relations was simply no longer considered chaste as the boundaries of her body, in being penetrated, were invaded and thus de-sacralized, while penetration of a female by an ex-monk would not lead to the invasion of his bodily boundaries in quite the same way.

temple in pairs) as disadvantages for women and thus advantages for men – arguments several interlocutors frequently listed in casual conversations. In general, women were considered to be more restricted and to suffer more due to pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and so on.[33] The questionnaire provided data that is consistent with the interviews, although in comparison with interlocutors, the respondents were more generous in their assessment of the advantages of being a woman.

And so, Buddhist women denigrate "their own potential and abdicate responsibility for the spiritual life to men, praying for rebirth as a man in the next life" (Tsomo, 1999c: 31). Several women and nuns stated that they pray for a male rebirth. When asked whether she hopes to be reborn as a man next life, Shi Wu expounded how someone with *shentong* prophesized that she will again be reborn as a female in the next life. She thought not to be good enough to be reborn as a man, but that she was – at least – a human, hence she could be diligent, so that one day she will be reborn as a man. Likewise, several Buddhist friends, female postgraduate students, lamented (in tears) in 1999 that they pray to be reborn as men because men have less attachment.[34] Thus the desire to attain a male rebirth exists even among Buddhist women with the highest academic credentials, and can therefore not be attributed to a lack of knowledge or education, a factor supported by the questionnaire. Rather, the views discussed above are internalized by Buddhist women and men of all social strata. There were no distinguishing recurring features in the social profiles, such as age or education, in the questionnaires or interviews associated with differences in such attitudes, save for a shared Mahāyāna Buddhist worldview that is nonetheless uniquely expressed and lived by each individual.

While not a single monk ever expressly denigrated or discriminated against women or

[33] Interview, 11.01.2003. See also Shi Yikong (2002).
[34] This incident gave rise to the initial conception of this PhD project.

nuns during the Triple Platform Ordination, a significant chauvinist facet surfaced during teachings on the *śrāmanera/śramanerī* (novice) vows. More than four hundred women and approximately one hundred and fifty men were present. Explaining the vow of abstaining from sexual activity, the lecturer *only* related stories of female temptresses – the usual misogynist plethora discussed by Wilson (1995, 1996).[35] Commenting on these stories, the male lecturer did not in a single instance deem the desire of men responsible for the breaking of their vow. Instead, the stories were related in a way that consistently portrayed women as predators. A particularly interesting story was told in connection with the vow of abstaining from entertainment. Music, it was reasoned, disturbs the mind. To clarify this, the lecturer told a story of an ascetic who lost his spiritual powers because he heard a woman singing. The mental afflictions of the ascetic were not deemed responsible for the loss, but the lovely song – of a woman!

This example shows how women (and men) are still indoctrinated with the view that they are more defiled than men, and that they are prone to cause men mental instability and distraction from chastity. The existence of such stories points to an androcentric – if not sexist – discourse, deployed by a certain individual, himself blinded by androcentric, or sexist tendencies – for whatever reason, exemplifying a chauvinistic attitude toward women.

Moreover, with the exception of the *Bhiksunī Prātimoksa*,[36] only men gave teachings during the ordination period, and only in that exclusively female audience did the female lecturer counter such views. Hence, some individuals expressly oppose such attitudes, but they do so behind closed doors.

[35] See also Senaverantna, 1955.

[36] The *Bhiksunī Prātimoksa* can only be taught by a *bhiksunī* to an exclusive female audience who has received the vows, that is, full ordination.

Ritualized Gender Hierarchy

Many aspects of everyday monastic codes and rituals reinscribe gender hierarchy. While some of them appear to be overtly sexist, others are more benign habitual patterns that interlocutors are unwilling to comment on, or to change, but more outspoken individuals did note them. Whilst few interlocutors criticized the current system openly, the patriarchal power structure of mixed temples in Taiwan is stressed by a male foreign observer: "Insgesamt wird das Zusammenleben in den Taiwanesischen Klöstern noch sehr von autoritären, partriarchalischen Verhaltensmuster bestimmt" (Günzel, 1998: 43).[37] Günzel also points out that although the *Vinaya* prescribes the necessity of separate living arrangements for monastics, monks and nuns frequently live in the same institutions in Taiwan, which, as Zhang and Lin (n.d.: 20) emphasize, leads to a discrepancy in gender equality. Further, even though the number of the nuns is higher than that of the monks, the leadership in monasteries remains in male hands (Günzel, 1998: 44). In the largest Buddhist temples in Taiwan, female outnumber male monastics, and yet men act as abbots. This fact is explained in two ways. The first deploys the rules in the *Vinaya* (as the statement by Shi Xiao elucidated), which disqualify women from ordaining men, thus obstructing women from acting as abbesses of temples with a mixed clergy. The second reason is the general need in the population for male spiritual guides, also noted by Shi Xiao. Zhang and Lin quote Jiang Canteng as saying, "No matter in which Buddhist temple, as long as it is a mixed community of women and men, the abbot will always be male." Shih Heng-ching confirms this: "The important point is that once men and women are together, men will certainly always take the superior position" (Zhang and Lin, n.d.: 17-18). Moreover, the inherent superiority of men as leaders can be attributed to the view of the intrinsic

[37] The translation reads as follows: "In general, the (communal) life in the Taiwanese monasteries is still strongly guided by authoritarian patriarchal habitual patterns."

inferiority of women in Taiwan society and segments of Buddhist discourse. Participant observation largely corroborates the above arguments.

No rule in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* stipulates that nuns cannot play musical instruments in the presence of monks. However, during the ordination period, all liturgies were led by male instructors while the female instructors supervised the kitchen.[38] Only twice did women lead the chanting: during the ordination of the nuns, when all male instructors were absent, and when the monks had not yet been ordained as *bhiksus*. The day after their ordination, however, the newly ordained *bhiksus* played the instruments. Until the very last day, even when the newly ordained *bhiksunīs* were in a single-sex group, they never even touched the instruments. They were either played by the monks (in the presence of males), or by female instructors (when all monks were absent). The female instructors did not play the instruments in the presence of the newly ordained *bhiksus*, who did so in their presence.

Frustration was noticeable when several newly ordained *bhiksunīs* discussed this issue. They believed that the nuns should also play the instruments, at least during the liturgy training. The newly ordained monks, by virtue of being male, had the privilege of leading some of the rituals. Correspondingly, during the ordination itself, the important rituals were presided over by male ordinands, except for the invitation of the ordaining masters, where two nuns represented the female ordinands (as opposed to the four monks) – although the nuns outnumbered the monks by at least 3:1. This might be based on rules laid down in the *Vinaya*, but several nuns resented this practice. Thus, ordained women *do* feel frustrated about such gendered hierarchy. It is not merely an ethnocentric observation of an outsider.

More interestingly, still, not all vows of the *Vinaya* were transmitted (let alone

[38] Two female ordinands conducted the ritual food offering to hungry ghosts.

followed).[39] Yet the ones reinforcing gender hierarchy appear to be privileged in their reiteration and particularly resistant to change. Four specific vows require monks and nuns to live under trees, wear rags, imbibe feces as medicine and to live exclusively off alms. The ordaining master thought these rules outdated and almost impossible to observe.[40] He therefore decided not to transmit them. In this way, some vows were simply not transmitted whereas others – such as the *Gurudharmas* – were retained. The fact that some of the vows which are considered the authentic precepts of the Buddha[41] were *not* transmitted during the Triple Platform Ordination invalidates the claim that others cannot be abolished because they were established by the Buddha, as some defenders of the *Gurudharmas* have it. Perhaps for this reason, Ven. Zhaohui[42] is said to have burned the *Gurudharmas*.[43]

One specific aspect of gendered hierarchy based on the *Vinaya* merits attention because the *Vinaya* is crucial in establishing an institutional basis for female dependency on the male clergy. As stated above, women have to receive the vows from both the *bhiksu* and *bhiksunī* sangha to receive legitimate full ordination (*Pāyāntika* #139, *Gurudharma* #4). On account of this rule, the Western nuns had assumed that both the questioning as to whether the nuns meet all the requirements for ordination, *and* the transmission of the vows were going to occur in front of the nuns first and then again in front of the monks. Only women

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[39] For a discussion of questions of precepts versus practice, see Tso, 1991.

[40] So are many of the rules that *were* transmitted.

[41] In contrast to the *Gurudharmas*, which many believe to be a later interpolation.

[42] Ven. Zhaohui is one of the most controversial figures in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism, as she is the most outspoken critic of sexist practices. But she is also (in)famous for granting refuge to stray animals at her temple. She was surreptitiously criticized by two lecturers, male and female, in teachings during the ordination period. This shows that outright challenges to hegemony may not be the most successful tactic in countering gender hierarchy. Nevertheless, Ven. Zhaohui was voted the tenth among the ten outstanding personalities in contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan, which shows her popularity despite the negative comments.

[43] Initially, I had planned to discuss questions of agency, that is, the ways in which contemporary Taiwanese women and nuns deal with and counteract androcentrism and sexism, but for reasons of confidentiality I decided against it. The abbesses who related their methods to me trusted me as an insider, not as a researcher when we discussed these issues. To reveal their methods might not only breach their confidence but subvert their strategies, stranding them before their projects are implanted deeply enough to bear fruit. The opposition such women face is sometimes more destructive than challenging, and they often operate as 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. But I would like to emphasize that patriarchal and sexist ways of "doing religion" are not entirely uncontested, and that they are being undermined as we speak – or write.

can receive the specific *bhiksunī* vows. They are observed and practiced by nuns – not by the monks. And yet, they were not transmitted in the all-female assembly.[44] The *actual* transmission of the vows, the acceptance and affirmation "I can uphold it", happened in front of the mixed male and female sangha, *presided over* by *men.* The female ordination masters sat at the side of the room. The all-female assembly merely questioned whether the nuns met the requirements for full ordination. They did *not* ordain.

Abbess A. had the greatest qualms with this particular *Gurudharma.* She maintained that this gives men authority over ordination in the long run, for ordination is only accepted and can thus *only* take place with their consent.[45] Therefore, institutionally, and legally, the validity of the *bhiksunī* ordination depends on the male clergy.[46] These rules can be, and *are* abused. Their appropriate application is entirely dependent on male whims. Thus the *Vinaya* must be considered a significant legitimating source for shaping and controlling gender relations. Yet not its mere existence is the key to this dilemma, since "no text is determinant in and of itself, apart from its changing contexts and uses" (Faure, 2003: 331). It has already been discussed how some parts are remembered and transmitted while others are ignored.

Several Buddhist scholars contend the eight *Gurudharmas* to be a later interpolation (Horner, 1930; Paul, 1985; Verma, 2000: 75), and some scholars maintain they have not been enforced in China (Zhang and Lin, n.d.: 10). Still, according to Ven. Zhaohui (2002), a contemporary trend asks women to comply with them, and Abbess A. observed how nuns

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[44] During the Song dynasty, the Imperial throne decreed that the *bhiksunī* ordination can be presided over by women (alone) (Hsieh, 1981: 160).

[45] Note that several of the *Gurudharmas* occur elsewhere in the *Bhiksunī Prātimoksa*, as does this one. So no matter whether the *Gurudharmas* are authentic vows proclaimed by the Buddha or not, this rule is certainly contained in the general vows.

[46] For this reason, it is difficult to reintroduce the *bhiksunī* ordination in various Buddhist countries, like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Tibet (India/Nepal), for as long as the assembly of monks disagrees, there is little leeway for individuals to bestow full ordination on women (full female ordination requires a quorum of ten monks and ten nuns).

will *always* be second to men, even in everyday practice: they will sit and walk behind them.[47]

The way in which this is enforced came to light in my personal experience. During the ordination period, we went on an alms round. The monks led the procession and the male instructors ensured that the women did not walk in front of the monks. There were two rows. One was headed by another Western nun, and the other by me, since we were the tallest. As we walked along the two sides of the road, there was a danger that one of us would catch up with the last (smallest-sized) monk of the opposite row of monks. The male instructors painstakingly kept us from walking ahead of the monks. After the outing, when attempting to cross the road to get from our coach to the temple, a male instructor told me very sternly to return to the coach and wait until *all* the monks had crossed the street. Some of them were still lingering around while most of them had already left. In the temple later, the three Western nuns were quite offended that only after the last monk had taken his lunch-box, were the nuns allowed to receive theirs.[48]

Another manifestation of gendered hierarchy surfaced in the way in which transgression of general rules (as opposed to monastic vows) were handled. *Vows* are said to have been laid down by the historical Buddha, while specific *rules* (of conduct) were established by the ordaining master for the duration of the ordination. After the *bhiksu* ordination, the ordaining master scolded the male group because some of the monks had reacted aggressively vis-à-vis the instructors, others had transgressed the *vow* of not taking intoxicants (they were caught with cigarettes), and another monk had run away. These

[47] For traditional seating arrangements, see Jones, 1997. Zhang and Lin (n.d.: 12), for instance, refer to the traditional seating arrangement as being "not exactly equal" since monks always sit, or stand, in front of the nuns, no matter how senior the nuns may be in comparison with the monks.

[48] When we pointed this out to Shi Chang, she said: "You guys see gender inequality in almost everything", thus challenging our obsession with gender. Interestingly, though, she was the most vocal when we discussed the *Gurudharmas* with Abbess A., and thought that there was no logical basis for the argument that *she* should pay respects to some *men*. Although she had grown up in a monastery in the USA, and had studied Buddhist philosophy, she was unaware of the existence of the *Gurudharmas* prior to her ordination. This shows on the one hand that they are not enforced, and on the other hand, that questions of gender are not openly discussed.

individuals were addressed as part of the male group. The culprits were not singled out.

The breaking of *rules* by nuns was handled quite differently. Two nuns had made telephone calls at a wrong time, and two other nuns had shaved their heads without having being told to do so, against the commands of the instructors.[49] They had to kneel down in the center of the main hall for the length of an incense stick (which are incidentally quite long). They were scolded harshly while kneeling down in the presence of all ordinands. In a culture that values "face", such a public humiliation can be considered rather disgraceful, especially because everybody made sure to turn around to have a good look at the offenders. This difference in punishment is noteworthy as the transgression of the *rules* by nuns seemed less momentous and forbidden (telephone calls and the shaving of the head, the latter usually being a respectable activity for monastics) in comparison to the monks. The transgressions by the monks not only related to a lack of respect and overt aggression, but they were the breach of *vows*. Gender conspicuously influenced the way in which the offenders were punished. (Admittedly, illegal mobile calls in the temple were quite disturbing, and thus the wrath of the ordaining master is understandable. Nonetheless, the same could surely be said about cigarette smoke.)

Another graphic manifestation of gender hierarchy came to the fore during a group-photo session. The ordaining nuns were not part of the group photo. A special photo was made exclusively with all nuns, in the absence of *all* males, including the newly ordained monks. Moreover, even though many of the female instructors were abbesses, they did not wear their yellow/red robes, denoting high institutional religious status while the male instructors – of whom many were relatively young and not necessarily abbots – wore their yellow/red robes. Only the highest female instructor appeared in her yellow

[49] The rules laid down at what time we were allowed to make telephone calls, take a shower, shave our heads and so on.

gown once, during the *bhiksunī* ordination, when she acted as an ordaining nun. Clothing is important as it denotes status. The Chinese, or Taiwanese monastic robe has been described as masculine. This is unfounded, as masculine/feminine forms of dress are culture and epoch specific. Monastic robes are not modern creations, hence arguing for their masculine or feminine character from a contemporary perspective seems somewhat anachronistic.[50] In short, the "masculinity" or "femininity" of clothing lies largely in the eye of the beholder. However, the status attached to certain types of dress is less ambiguous.

Throughout the ordination period, the ordinands had to dress in black robes, the instructors wore brown robes, and the abbot, ordaining masters, the two male senior instructors and lecturers (except for the female teacher), all wore yellow robes. When we received Bodhisattva vows, several male instructors wore yellow robes due to their ritual position. During the five weeks of the ordination period, yellow robes clearly indicated the highest status while brown robes suggested a less important status, and black robes were worn by those at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Why the habit was changed during the photo-session remains a mystery, but it reveals how the monks were symbolically separated from the nuns through their differently colored clothing. At the same time, they were elevated to the status of ordaining monks, who had been dressed in yellow throughout the ordination period. In this way, the color of the robes illustrated the gendered hierarchy of status during the ordination period.[51]

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[50] The Tibetan robe, for example, has sometimes posed problems for Western monks of the Tibetan order who told me that they were asked why they were wearing a skirt! Gender confusion thus not only occurs when nuns are mistaken for men, but also when men break with secular clothing habits.

[51] A similar habit pertains to wearing the rosary around one's neck. Only abbots and abbesses are supposed to do so. It is a common practice among Tibetan Buddhists to wear the rosary around the neck, thus when I arrived in the monastery, the nuns were appalled to see the rosary around my neck and passionately indicated that I can under no circumstance do so. The force of threat was so strong that I could not possibly disobey. I discuss this example with respect to the above paragraph for several reasons. Firstly, certain modes of conduct are common knowledge, such as the rosary rule and the dressing code. They need not be explicitly stated for insiders. The rosary incident only occurred due to my ignorance. Similarly, although it was not *expressis verbis* mentioned that only monks of certain rank were allowed to wear the yellow robe, we were expressly told *not* to wear the brown robe. Interlocutors held that one has to have been ordained for several years, or decades,

Interlocutors claimed the *Vinaya* stipulates that monks should not prostrate to nuns. The *Vinaya*, however, also decrees that nuns should not serve men (*Pāyāntika* #75).[52] The female instructors were instrumental in organizing the kitchen service, and the newly ordained nuns kept serving the newly ordained monks, who were responsible for heavy-duty chores and for cleaning the temple. But when prostrating to the instructors to express their gratitude, the newly ordained monks were forbidden to prostrate to the female instructors, while the newly ordained nuns had to prostrate to the male instructors, even though the female instructors had acted as their teachers, and not the male ones. The respect and gratitude expressed to the female instructors through prostrations was again sex-specific.

During her fieldwork, Tsung observed the division of labor in monasteries to parallel the secular sphere: "The monks have a higher priority in choosing assignments. This rationale is accepted by monks and nuns alike. That is, men should be and are capable of more religious cultivation and so they ought to have more time devoted to it. They are also more in demand in ritual performance for the laity" (Tsung, 1978: 144). Her statement still applies today, nearly thirty years since she conducted her fieldwork. In addition, although role models adhere largely to society's norms, monasteries project the image of apparent equality (Tsung, 1978: 145). Naturally, many believe equality to pervade Buddhism in Taiwan. As Tsung states, monasteries project an image of themselves as being egalitarian, and since gendered monastic practices comply with those of the secular sphere, they are not perceived as unequal but as "normal". Still, the bias of such a division of labor is apparent to some insiders as well as foreign observers.

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before one can wear them. Just to see the reaction of interlocutors when leading a ritual in another temple, I put on the brown robe only to encounter bewilderment! Hence although explicit evidence that the nuns could not wear their yellow robe may be lacking, the habit during the ordination period and my experience as a nun offer sufficient evidence for its grounding in common knowledge and practice.

[52] For a translation of the *Bhiksuni Pratimoksa*, see Tsomo, 1996.

Rhetorical Paternalism

Gendered hierarchy is often veiled by paternalistic rhetoric. Chinese culture in particular appears to conceal inequality in caring, paternalistic terms.[53] Furth's study (1986), for example, demonstrates how in order to control female reproduction, men created paternalistic medical discourses, enabling medical supervision by men. A similar paternalistic propensity came to light during the Triple Platform Ordination.

When I asked why the monks were always leading the rituals, and why it was always a monk who prostrated in the middle of the shrine room, Shi Chang maintained that this is the way it is. Upon further questioning, she argued that women cannot be in the middle, because they're not up to it. When asked what this meant, she said that if one prostrates on the central seat, one can see beings in hell realms and so on. Women would not be able to cope with such a situation. When I further questioned this interpretation, she judged women as not having the mental stability to be in the center. By this time, the other Western nuns voiced their opposition loudly. Shi Chang then argued that, in fact, it is very dangerous for women to occupy the central seat. She maintained women who prostrate in the central seat (and therefore occupy the highest ritual position) to be short-lived, yet the reasons for the premature death of the nuns who occupy the central seat were unknown to her. She claimed it as her own personal observation and gracefully ignored the question, "How about nunneries, then?"

Paternalism was also employed during teachings on the Bodhisattva vows. First, the lecturer emphasized how the Buddha's teachings have to be valued and studied so as to impart correct understanding. He took the *Gurudharmas* as an example in the context of a particular Taiwanese nun who is famous for having burned them openly, stating that they

[53] In another paper, (Yeshe, 2003b), and in Chapter Five I discuss the connection of menstrual taboos and paternalism.

were never intended to denigrate women, or to downplay their spiritual potential, but to *protect* them.[54] As stated earlier, others have argued the same about three of the four additional *Pārājikas* for *bhiksunīs*. In both instances, it was completely ignored that such projections *de facto* subordinate nuns to the monks.

In view of this evidence, it appears safe to deduce that paternalistic rhetoric is used when arguments for gendered hierarchy lack coherent logic, or have no scriptural testimony. A recurring pattern surfaced in several conversations. At first questioning, interlocutors argued, "this is the way it is", and "it is the way it has always been", that "there is no particular reason for it", and "why do you have to stick your nose into affairs that are none of your business". Then, they used the argument "women are less worthy/capable, or more defiled" in one way, or the other. Paternalism seemed to be the last resort, just before signaling to me that I was an ignorant foreigner – I obviously only pushed conversations with friends to this stage. Nonetheless, paternalistic arguments were mainly used in conversations when the logic of interlocutors was unpersuasive. Most of the time, paternalism was not the first resort, but it worked the best, for it is difficult to argue against good intentions.

[54] He did not state her name, neither did the female lecturer when she referred to Ven. Zhaohui who is so controversial that mere references to her actions are sufficient to identify her. Furthermore, in Buddhist circles it is mostly not considered appropriate to criticize others, because it such is often interpreted as a negative verbal deed.

Conclusion

> The bodily practice of Buddhist nuns shaving their heads and dressing in robes has the 'constructive' implication of gender equality. Not only do they have the same appearances as Buddhist monks, but also enjoy gender equality and mutual respect in their everyday practice [...] Located in Chinese Confucian structure, Buddhist nuns become de-gendered. That is, they join the monks as "Buddhists" but not as nuns *versus* monks (Chern, 2000: 310, 320 respectively).

This chapter provides ample evidence for the contrary. Only one interlocutor (Shi Wu) connected the shaven head with androgyny. A shaven head and similar clothing may be sufficient ground for the establishment of androgyny for some (Tsung, 1978: 249, for instance), but it provides by no means enough force for the argument of gender equality. On the contrary, inequality still pervades many aspects of Taiwanese Buddhism.

Nuns do *not* "join" the monks on an equal footing. Instead, the data provided here reveals how nuns are subordinated to monks in many respects. Tsomo's (1999a: 20) statement that, "quietly and relentlessly challenging Confucian preconceptions of the servile wife and daughter, Chinese women in Taiwan have proved their strength in [...] religion" is only true to a limited extent. While the status and presence of nuns has significantly increased in contemporary Taiwan, and various manifestations of sexism, such as the pollution beliefs discussed in Chapter Five have largely vanished, on the whole, my data illustrates how Buddhist women in Taiwan are still subjected to and required to conform to traditional Confucian and Buddhist norms and beliefs, often entailing gender hierarchy. Several interlocutors resist(ed) practices and views rooted in gender difference. However, most did accept the cultural assumption of the inferiority of the female sex.

The gender hierarchy pervading Buddhism in Taiwan is reflected in the fact that nuns embody linguistic and corporeal androcentrism.[55] Further, my data revealed them to be in a position inferior to monks due to particular cultural practices and beliefs, as well as

[55] The latter being discussed in Chapter Seven.

monastic codes. Asserting that gender equality suffuses Buddhism in Taiwan would indeed have been a delightful conclusion. But this chapter establishes a contrary view. It brings to light questions of sex and gender hierarchy which are deeply grounded in contemporary practices and historical beliefs. Although most of the issues raised here are by no means unique to Taiwanese Buddhism, since many scholars and Taiwanese Buddhists present their gender relations as egalitarian, it is important to emphasize that complete equality is not yet achieved. And so, to present a critical Taiwanese voice, I would like to quote Ven. Zhaohui (2002) at length. In a paper presented at the seventh Sakyadhita Conference, she discusses

> [...] the question of women's rights within the chauvinistic structure of Buddhism. After nine years of activism in the field of women rights, I feel that this field is still on the level of theory and abstraction, without any active movement [...] Under male authority, who have had the power to interpret the Buddhist texts, women have became demonized into monsters with 84 shameful behaviors. Likewise, the eight *Gurudharmas* constitute an evil system that makes women feel inferior and makes men arrogant. [...] Let there be a reasonable, public debate about whether to keep or abolish the Eight Chief Rules. Hopefully Buddhist male chauvinism can break out of its narrow-mindedness and reach full psychological and intellectual maturity. [...] Another tactic I have promoted is to awaken the nuns' critical sense and psychological freedom, since nuns have long slumbered under the slave mentality produced by their education. This change of attitude is even more crucial than passing secular laws.

Ven. Zhaohui's statement echoes many of my observations and ruminations. She believes a change of attitude to be crucial, hence to connect my concluding remarks with the introduction, perhaps the present state is truly a point of transition, and as structural changes have already eroded certain aspects of traditional gender hierarchies, the next step might entail a change of attitude toward female rebirth, and all it entails. Chapter Five revisits this question.

☙ *Chapter Five* ❧
Reassessing Menstruation Taboos and Pollution Beliefs

Chapter Four illustrated how paternalistic rhetoric sometimes hides negative attitudes toward women in benign language. A similar aspect emerges in pollution beliefs and menstruation taboos, which – unlike previously assumed – appear to hold little significance for Buddhists today. Although they clearly *were* part of popular Buddhist discourse in the past, and initial observations in Taiwan in 1999 confirmed their persistence, fieldwork between 2001-2003 demonstrates such views to have fundamentally changed.

Consequently, recent data differs considerably from the information collected during the 1970s and 1980s. For this reason, menstrual taboos and pollution beliefs are first discussed as presented in earlier research. Then, this chapter moves on to a discussion of the Chinese apocryphal *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, which illustrates former attitudes toward reproductive processes.

This chapter then compares recent data with previous observations and theories, suggesting that menstrual taboos grounded in overt sexism, or misogyny are more liable to change than those justified by paternalistic rhetoric. The first were adduced primarily in relation to temple taboos where women were seen as threatening themselves and others, and as disturbing the cosmic order. The second were adduced in relation to meditation taboos where the main danger was the practitioner herself. Such negative views of menstruation based on benevolent paternalism work to the detriment of women practitioners almost covertly as they are subtly embedded in deceivingly caring terms. They are therefore not easily seen to be discriminatory and are thus rarely challenged. Accordingly, paternalist rhetoric that is capable of manipulating the self-interest of women may be a strong force in the perseverance of pejorative attitudes toward women. Moreover, whereas

women expressed fairly relaxed attitudes toward uterine blood, men showed stronger ambivalent attitudes toward menstruation.

This chapter further proposes several factors which might be considered to have had a bearing on this change of attitude among Buddhists, most notably: different attitudes toward menstruation due to an improvement of personal hygiene products; the "purification" of Buddhism; and the predominance of women in Buddhism – nuns in particular. Hence, the eclipsing of menstrual temple taboos reflects a number of social and religious changes in contemporary Taiwan.

Theoretical Considerations

Several scholars have claimed notions of women's pollution to be a stock argument of patriarchal discourse. According to previous and more recent research (Furth and Chen, 1992), taboos relating to female bodies and the discourse of women's pollution survive in contemporary Taiwan. Many Taiwanese – men and women alike – adhered to misogynist attitudes toward female bodies and sexuality, characterizing their bodies as polluted. These are neither uniquely Taiwanese, nor distinctively Chinese phenomena (Yeshe, n.d.). However, notions of female pollution *were* used to sustain male hegemony. Especially in the religious sphere, arguments of the polluted and polluting female restricted women's religious practice, and thereby exalted the religious and spiritual status of men.

Ahern [Martin] (1975; 1988), Chu (1980), Seaman (1981), Furth (1986), Furth and Chen (1992) and Cole (1998) analyzed Chinese and Taiwanese beliefs relating to menstrual practices and the pollution of women. More recently, Faure (2003) discussed questions of purity and pollution in the context of gender and Buddhism. Even so, Püschel (1988: 12) laments the scarcity of data regarding Chinese, or Buddhist menstrual taboos.

Furth (1986) focused exclusively on uterine blood in the framework of medical

theories while in a later paper, Furth and Chen (1992) discussed attitudes toward menstruation in Taiwan, based on empirical data collected during the 1980s, claiming pollution beliefs to be widespread. "The continuity and vitality of popular religion ensures that certain ritual avoidances are still respected" (Furth and Chen, 1992: 28, see also 31, 34). Popular Buddhism, they maintained, emphasizes the pollution of menstrual blood, hence most women consider menstrual blood as "unclean". Chu (1980) portrayed Chinese attitudes toward menstrual blood in a similar way. So did Ahern (1975), who, following Douglas' theoretical framework, proposed three approaches to pollution: explaining it in the framework of the nature of unclean substances, as a reflection of women's social roles, and in relation to ideas.[1] She rejected the second approach. Seaman developed Ahern's third approach and interpreted pollution in the context of the law of cause and effect. Cole (1998) did not specifically investigate female pollution, but his monograph elaborated views of the female body based on Chinese apocryphal texts. He developed Seaman's argument, and scrutinized the way in which Chinese Buddhists used the belief in karmic retribution to forge a close bond between sons, mothers and monasteries. Yet both Seaman and Cole considered pollution only in the context of karma, discounting how other aspects of Buddhist doctrine equally shape Chinese and Taiwanese attitudes towards the female body, as already presented in Chapter Two. Faure (2003) builds on their scholarship.

In short, several anthropologists recorded menstrual taboos and pollution beliefs in the context of Buddhism and popular religion during the 1970s and 1980s in Taiwan, while Sinologists faithfully drew on these studies in their analyses of issues related to female pollution (for instance Cole, 1998; Faure, 2003; Furth, 1999).[2] However, the conflation of popular religious views with Buddhism may have led several scholars – including myself

[1] For a critique of Douglas, see Allen (2002).

[2] Several aspects I discussed in a paper based on archival research and fieldwork in 1999 (Yeshe, 2003b) are reconsidered here in the light of data collected between 2001-2003.

(Yeshe, 2003b) – to conclusions no longer applicable to Taiwan today. Certain Buddhist beliefs and practices about menstrual pollution do not openly persist – indeed the Buddhist clergy openly challenges them. But others survive, even if surreptitiously.

Many scholars argued that the analysis of pollution beliefs must be situated in the broader context of gendered power. Ahern, for example, assumed women's procreative potential to have brought about discrimination against them:

> Many of the most polluting substances emanate from a woman's reproductive organs, the source of her greatest power over her husband's family, her ability to produce descendants. Once the polluting power of the sex act (which begins the child's development), menstrual blood (which becomes the child's flesh and bones), and childbirth (which brings the child into the husband's family) is established, the source of a woman's power is obscured by a layer of negative sentiment (Ahern, 1975: 214).

Studies often focused on the polluting nature of women's effluviae. Ahern, in a way similar to Douglas, thought that people deem all fluids transgressing bodily boundaries to be defiled – all physical liquids are deemed *dirty*, but not necessary *polluting* (that is interfering with the relationship between gods and humans) (Douglas, 1966: 122; 1999; Ahern, 1975: 195). Instead, only female uterine fluids were considered *polluting* (Ahern, 1975: 194ff). In such a theoretical framework, other bodily effluviae need to be taken into consideration as female fluids, albeit claimed polluting, are not alone in crossing the boundaries of the body. Since ethnographic data is scarce, it remains an open question whether other bodily outflows, such as mucus, semen, feces and pus were equally considered to jeopardize rituals and spiritual practices in Taiwanese religious life.[3]

Eberhard (1967: 64), for instance, thought Chinese as considering *all* bodily functions, especially those related to sexuality, unclean. In this context, a claim of one interlocutor

[3] For instance, we do not know to what extent urine and feces are considered defiled, and whether they are particularly polluting when they are brought into sanctified precincts, or cosmic schemes. It is of interest to note that Chan Buddhism did not regard feces with dismay. Because Chinese monasteries were largely self-sufficient, feces were essential as fertilizers. Nonetheless, a widespread belief holds that awakened beings stop passing feces, which suggests that they are beyond corporeality, implying a pejorative attitude toward human waste. Whether these assumptions are verifiable requires further study. Before we are able to draw persuasive conclusions on pollution and taboos, we need more data concerning the polluting power of other bodily discharges.

merits attention: he stated that Buddhists should neither worship nor meditate before and after sexual intercourse, a view Ahern (1975: 205) also reported.[4] Thus, not only uterine blood threatens religious practice, but male and female sexual fluids. Perhaps, physical processes and activities judged instinctual, or uncontrolled, are denigrated vis-à-vis spiritual, or controlled ones. Semen and uterine blood (rather than vaginal fluid) are both linked to sexuality. Therefore, if sexual intercourse itself is regarded with suspicion, as is the case in celibate Buddhism,[5] the liquids connected to the very act might be stigmatized as well.

While other bodily liquids can be controlled and conveniently discharged, women have to live with a presumably uncontrollable ongoing flow of blood for several days. In this way, uterine blood, in contrast to urine and feces, is introduced into temples and thus into the realm of the gods, who are said to be offended by it (Wolf, 1972: 95), an aspect Tsung's data (1978: 153) confirms.[6] It might thus be a question of *locale*, where it happens, rather than *matter*, the substance itself, which makes certain substances more polluting than others. Ms Wen referred to the belief that in the past, menstruating women could not enter the main temple precinct, while they were allowed to worship in the outer compartments.[7]

Earlier Ethnography and the Blood Bowl Sūtra

Chinese cosmology and philosophy aligned the female with 陰 *Yin*, "belong[ing] to the realm of darkness and impurity" (Faure, 1998: 129), and the male with 陽 *Yang*. Scholars still discuss whether *Yin* and *Yang* are complementary or antithetically binary (Camman, 1987; Graham, 1986; 1990; Granet, 1997). Nonetheless, throughout Chinese philosophy

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[4] Paul (1985: 59 n.76) states, "according to the *Aganna Suttanta*, sexual intercourse was originally a violation of another human being's virtue".

[5] Consider the *Udayanavatsarajaparivartah*: "They still breed with women like cattle or sheep" (quoted after Paul, 1985: 49). See also Paul (1985: 9), and Jackson (1998). Significantly, after the Buddha's conception, his mother vowed to remain chaste (Paul, 1985: 49).

[6] The *Blood Bowl Sūtra* also maintains that, because uterine blood is introduced into the cosmic cycle, it is offensive. Details below.

[7] Interview, 16.01.2003.

and popular culture *Yin* and *Yang* were both deemed essential and in many respects equal. However, in social practice, *Yang* was often considered superior to *Yin*. According to Guisso, Chinese judged women's bodies for the most part as unclean and polluting (Guisso, 1981: 59; see also Xian, 1994: 310). By the time Buddhism took root in China, indigenous Chinese cosmological speculations had established views of the female body (Xian, 1994: 305). Such views were almost certainly conflated with Buddhist beliefs.

Texts like the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* evidence a long history of intensive interaction between Chinese and Buddhist ideas. Bray writes, "the virulently misogynist equation of female fertility with cosmic pollution is not in Indian precursors of the Chinese Buddhist scriptures, they must stem from indigenous Chinese ideas about birth and pollution" (Bray, 1997: 342 n.16). A specific Chinese Buddhist discourse evolved over the course of several centuries that depicted female embodiment with more and more distaste. As Cole emphasizes, "Buddhist authors of texts on family values submitted to the pre-existing structure of family reproduction and made nearly all their dictates supportive of, or at least consonant with, traditional forms of patrilineal reproduction" (Cole, 1998: 226). Clearly, Chinese Buddhist discourse produced indigenous scriptures that are intimately linked with the construction of gender and reproduction.[8]

One of these scriptures, the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, was apparently considered a Buddhist text in Taiwan until recently.[9] Furth, for example, thought it still to be performed today (Furth, 1999: 308; see also Faure, 2003: 76). Even though Seaman (1981) and Cole (1998) noted copies were readily available in local temples, my fieldwork does not confirm their observation: not a single copy was offered in (Buddhist) temples in Taiwan, and I

[8] These findings challenge earlier theories, which maintained that Chinese Buddhism espoused positive ideals of women based on the currency of texts such as the *Virmalakirtidirdeśa* (Barnes, 1985: 90-91).
[9] Xian, 1994; Cole, 1998; Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 2550. The *Blood Bowl Sūtra* was transmitted to Japan from China in the 14th century and held considerable influence in Japan (Momoko, 1983).

encountered much stupefaction when I asked for it in a Buddhist bookshop. Moreover, no interlocutor had ever read this sūtra, and only one had ever heard of its title. Likewise, only 23% of the respondents to the questionnaire had ever heard of it, and not even 5% claimed to recite it. Furthermore, three respondents explicitly mentioned it as a "forgery". Similarly, in teachings on the *śrāmanera/śramaneri* vows during the ordination period, the lecturer requested us *expressis verbis* to study only authentic sūtras, and *not* texts such as the *Blood Bowl Sūtra.* His strong emphasis may be taken to indicate that this text is known to Buddhists and mistaken for a Buddhist scripture, that people still recite it, that the Buddhist clergy is aware of it being apocryphal, and tries to curb its influence.[10] The digital dictionaries published by Foguangshan and Fagushan, which are readily available, also deem it a "forgery".

Although Buddhists today seem to think the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* is an indigenous Chinese text, it was deemed an authentic scripture in Taiwan in the past. In the early 1950s, Ven. Dongchu surveyed Taiwanese temples and argued on account of the recitation of this text in Buddhist temples that Buddhism in Taiwan had degenerated (Jones, 1999: 113).[11] Thus, although fifty years ago the Mainland Chinese clergy appears to have acknowledged the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* to be an indigenous Chinese text, Buddhists in Taiwan later still judged it a legitimate Buddhist scripture. It is well known that Buddhism in Taiwan was a minor force prior to the Japanese rule and relocation of the Kuomintang, hence the popularity of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* during the 1970s seems to have been entirely determined by the former predominance of popular religion. The "purification" of popular religion through institutionalized Buddhism may account for this change of views. As Weller writes: "In reality, systematized ideologies, like any system of meaning, can be reinterpreted in new

[10] Xian believes that taboos against women generally stem from Daoism, not Buddhism (Xian, 1994: 299). He cites the *Lun Heng* 論恒, a text from the Han dynasty, as presenting female secondary sexual parts as inauspicious to establish that negative attitudes toward the female body were current *and* recorded prior to the arrival of Buddhism in China (Ibid. 305).

[11] As stated earlier, this can be attributed to the influence of the Japanese period where folk temples disguised themselves as Buddhist so as to prevent persecution.

social contexts. Institutions try to protect their ideologies from interpretation by controlling the context" (Weller, 1987: 145). The diminishing of the currency of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* shows the magnitude of the Buddhist clergy's control.

Notwithstanding its questionable authenticity, this text was nonetheless included in the Chinese Buddhist canon. How frequently it was recited or performed must remain an open question. There are simply no means of establishing to what extent the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* and related texts influenced the general discourse on women's pollution and menstruation taboos in retrospect. However, although most Buddhists do not recite or study the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* today, they might have done so in the past, and it might still be known to followers of popular religion (one scholar in Taiwan maintained that the text is still secretly available among adherents of popular religion).[12] Further, its incorporation in *Baojuan* literature 寶卷 "Precious Scrolls" (Faure, 2003: 74), which had a wide circulation in pre-modern times, signals that its views might have extended beyond its limits as a religious scripture. As explained in Chapter One, most interlocutors had a rather syncretistic religious outlook, or frequented popular religious temples before they converted to Buddhism, hence even though it is not canonical Buddhism, some of its underlying values may still be influential. For this reason, it is worthwhile considering this dubious sūtra here.

Research conducted in Taiwan during the 1970s and 1980s often led to the conclusion that menstruating and pregnant women were seen as polluting not only in popular imagination, but also in Buddhism – based on the currency of the (then allegedly Buddhist) *Blood Bowl Sūtra.* Pollution beliefs and menstrual taboos were seen as mutually dependent. Ahern (1975: 197), for instance, suggested taboos relating to childbirth to derive from the connection of birth and death, and fear thereof. Such beliefs about the pollution of birth were propagated in theatrical plays and widely disseminated in *Baojuan* literature (Grant,

[12] Personal Communication with a scholar of popular religion, Taipei, 2001.

1989: 236). They were also reflected in Chinese apocryphal sūtras such as the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* and the *Sūtra [Explaining that] the Kindness of one's Parents is Profound and Difficult to Repay*, which compares childbirth with the slaughter of sheep: [...] 血似屠羊, connecting birth with death, and thus pollution.[13] Correspondingly, taboos particularly pervaded the biological processes preceding childbirth.[14] In this context, it is worth mentioning how popular religious discourse equated uterine blood with samsāra – the forces of becoming, casting its producer to a blood hell, a gruesome spot awaiting solely women:[15]

> [...] It is not something that involves men. It only has to do with women, who every month leak menses or in childbirth release blood which seeps down and pollutes the earth gods (*Blood Bowl Sūtra*, Cole, 1998: 202).

In this quotation, menstruating and childbearing women are depicted as offending the cosmic order with their uterine blood. As retribution, they were sent to the hellish blood pond. Hence according to the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, "women are relegated to hell for the most natural processes, and it is specifically uterine blood that is problematic" (Cole, 1998: 202).

The *Blood Bowl Sūtra* represents women as filthy, suffering, ignorant and as infested by defilements. They have to be rescued by their sons, who thereby repay their karmic debt for having been born, from the hellish blood pond, where they are said to end up after their death as when alive, their uterine blood offended the cosmic order and gods therein. It further promulgates the theory that worms inhabit women's joints and vaginas.[16] These bi-partite worms feed on blood and thereby cause menstruation: "a woman's body is an

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[13] Cole (1998: 6) indicates this text to be a product of the Song period (960-1279): "[it] can be seen as the culmination of the centuries of writing that went into elaborating a Buddhist theory of reproduction." The Chinese *Blood Bowl Sūtra* explicitly lists birth, death, sexual intercourse, the body, the ego and death as unclean (Seaman, 1981: 389).

[14] "Any menstruating woman, lay or cleric, is forbidden to enter the main worship hall, or touch any sacred object of religious significance. Most claim they're sick [...] They are afraid of offending Buddhas and other deities by bringing the pollution near the statues" (Tsung, 1978: 153). Soucy (1999: 269) observed the same in Vietnam.

[15] Originally, there was no special hell for women in Buddhist cosmology (Paul, 1985: 7). This belief was apparently the result of a Daoist-Buddhist interaction. Unlike Zhang (1997), Xian (1994: 310) maintains that Buddhist discourse itself did not promote discrimination against specifically feminine uterine processes.

[16] Note that the *Sūtra on Exchanging the Female Sex*, a text that seemingly does not appear in the Sanskrit canon, also refers to worms in the female body.

unclean collection of worm's pus and filth" (Seaman, 1981: 387, 389). Menstruation indicates the very presence of these worms. Because they are bi-partite, they embody dualism, which directly precludes a menstruating woman from attaining awakening, which is said to be beyond dualism. With menopause, the bi-partite worms no longer feast on the female body: women's dualistic mode of existence ceases with the cessation of her menses. In ceasing to menstruate, women eradicate these worms and have the possibility of attaining awakening since dualism is overcome.

This corporeal dualism is also inherent in the conflict between her affinal and filial relations. By the time menopause sets in, women have given birth to sons and have thus secured themselves a place in the husband's family rather than negotiating the tensions between their dual relationships with their natal family and their in-laws (Faure, 1998: 129-130). They live beyond the social dualism that overshadowed their youth.[17] On the other hand, in having produced offspring, they are also subject to rebirth in the blood hell.

Ahern thought menstruating women to have been ostracized because menstrual blood signifies power. Seaman also claimed the potency of such blood. So did Faure: "menstrual blood is the most potent ingredient in magic charms that give power over people" (Faure, 1998: 129-130) – Chinese medical theory held uterine blood to be efficacious in curing diseases related to sexuality and fertility (Furth, 1986: 47ff). Hence uterine blood was indisputably thought to be endowed with powerful potential. However, although taboos relating to uterine blood could be explained in the framework of its 'potency' and 'feminine power', women's powers were ultimately channeled by a patriarchal society which obliged them to reproduce, and valued their offspring (especially sons) while simultaneously disparaging women because of that very reproduction. One could posit, since menstruation

[17] Dualism also characterizes pregnancy: a pregnant woman is no longer one person. Topley's (1974: 237) interlocutors suggested that, "a pregnant woman has four eyes". Such dualism stigmatizes her for a full month after childbirth (Ahern, 1975: 202; Wolf, 1972: 56-57).

and pregnancy are not daily occurrences, taboos restricted women only at certain times. Still, no corresponding injunction has been recorded with respect to men (Tsung, 1978: 153).

Cole (1998: 217) contends in this respect that because the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* connected mother and son in karmic cycles, in the long run, it was oppressive for both women and men. Nonetheless, according to the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, men merely set their mothers free. They are not sent to hell for coming into contact with polluting substances. Despite their responsibility in the creation of life, men are not explicitly seen as co-creators of this karmic burden.[18] The *Blood Bowl Sūtra* so fervently denigrated women that no woman could escape her fate in hell, rendering women's spirituality superfluous, while at the same time elevating male religious practice.

> The fact that they are women is sufficient to put them beyond the pale of Buddhist belongingness. Regardless how pure their Buddhist practice is, their female bodies require that they face retribution in a Buddhist hell [...] This is the lesson that Buddhist women are not good Buddhists and do not fare well in the Buddhist cosmos because they have foul bodily functions that disturb the hierarchical order (Cole, 1998: 203-204).

Cole argues so on the basis of apocryphal sūtras. Yet because the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* is no longer considered a Buddhist text in Taiwan (and almost certainly Mainland China), Cole's statement rather applies to the past – if Buddhists ever considered it a Buddhist text – and possibly to contemporary popular religion. Today, field data establishes the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* to hold little significance in Taiwanese Buddhism. Instead, assertions of inherent female inferiority, as discussed in Chapter Four, are more widespread and influential than the transparently virulent misogyny of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra.* Such assertions are attributed to texts which are considered authentic sūtras, and which are widely read. So, while Buddhists in Taiwan today may not know about the blood hell, they do accept the argument of the inherently defiled female/feminine. This illustrates how plainly misogynist views, and those

[18] "Women are held responsible for creating polluting bodily matter in the first place" (Ahern, 1988: 173).

based on spurious scriptures erode more readily than beliefs that are expressed in religious discourse, justified by institutionalized religion – discussed in detail below.

Although Indian Buddhist texts do not to urge women to interrupt their spiritual practice during menstruation – apparently not a single passage in sūtras requires women to do so, Nichiren, in the 13th century replied to a woman who was concerned about the appropriateness of her recitation of sūtras during her menstruation: "I have never come across any passage in the sūtras or treatises that speaks of avoidances connected with menstruation [...] I would say that menstruation does not represent any kind of pollution coming from exterior sources. It is simply a characteristic of the female sex, a phenomenon related to the perpetuation of birth and death" (Ueki, 2001: 113). This statement shows on the one hand that the question of spiritual practice during menstruation was posed by Buddhists in the past (though the example comes from Japan). On the other hand, it illustrates how Buddhist patriarchs were unable to resolve such questions on the basis of Buddhist scriptural testimony.

Historical Parallels

The context in which the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* was presumably composed merits attention. Chan teachers are believed to have countered prevailing misogynist attitudes toward women in their espousal of the female *Dazhangfu*, the 'Great Man' (Hsieh, 1981: 149, 178; Levering, 1982: 22). Is it a mere twist of fate that the misogynist *Blood Bowl Sūtra* was composed at approximately the same time?[19] A revealing historical parallel is that feminine representations of Guanyin in popular religion predominated from the Song Dynasty onwards. Until then, the anthropomorphization of compassion had been predominantly male (Reed, 1992: 160-161; Paul, 1983: 167). This might suggest that there was a specific need for a female

[19] Levering, 1982: 22; 1992: 137; 1998; Xian, 1994: 298, 312, 316. Xian establishes the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* as the product of the end of the Tang/beginning of Song dynasty.

goddess. Moreover, Guanyin worship entailed increased devotional activity, and hence an increasing cleavage between awakened Bodhisattvas and ordinary humans, where women were demarcated as inferior to men. Only after the persecution of Buddhism during the Tang dynasty did devotional Pure Land and Chan Buddhism gain supremacy in China (Shih, 1992: 2ff; Barnes, 1987: 125). Therefore, the success of devotional Buddhism, or Pure Land Buddhism may well have enabled theories of pollution to proliferate (remember that women are not reborn in their female form in the Pure Land).

During the same period, Daoist theories of physical transformation in the context of Interior Alchemy started to flourish – this comprised practices to stop menstruation (Robinet, 1997: 101; see Chapter Six for details). Further, popular religion with its espousal of particularly negative views of women took form in the Song dynasty (Overmyer, 1991: 107). Popular religion gave rise to scriptures – which reached large audiences – that presented women's reproductive processes negatively. The *Blood Bowl Sūtra* was possibly one of them, yet one scholar (without providing adequate sources for his hypothesis) alleges a Chinese Chan monk to have composed it "on or after the 10th century" (Ueki, 2001: 113 n.21). However, it was "during the Song dynasty that female blood was essentialized as unclean, requiring ritual procedures of purification" (Furth, 1999: 94).

Furth provides the demystifying trace for this mélange of developments: Song society revised ancient kinship systems. This had a significant bearing on gender constructs. Medical theory in particular proposed the identification of women with fertility (Ebrey, 2003: 10ff; Furth, 1999: 60). Correspondingly, during the Song dynasty, argues Levering (1997: 165), the social context advocated that, "all but one of the roles for women were closely tied to marriage, sexuality, and reproduction, [...] the meaning of one's life was seen as lying in her reproductive structure."

This evidence implies a historical transition in the construction of femininity. The

Song reconstruction of the kinship system apparently generated competing discourses vis-à-vis female embodiment, pollution, and so on. The Chan Buddhist discourse on the transformation of gender, and the belief in the cessation of menstrual blood, discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, might have been conscious attempts to limit increasingly negative views of women, as some scholars argue, or perhaps, they were simply constituents of an anti-feminine tendency in Chinese culture at that particular point in time. Although it could be argued that the rhetoric of the corporeal transformation of women only reinforced patriarchal or misogynist views of women, considering the socio-cultural circumstances at the time, there was presumably little leeway for outright challenges. On account of the above data, it appears plausible that they were part of divergent discourses regarding women, femininity and female embodiment. Even though further speculation is encumbered by insufficient data, the evidence suggests that multi-vocality, across a spectrum ranging from virulent misogyny to a "rhetoric of equality" vis-à-vis female embodiment has been a feature of Chinese (religious) discourse since at least the Song dynasty.

Consent and Dissent

Although Taiwanese popular religious discourse stigmatizes menstruating and pregnant women, the fecundity of the female sex is nonetheless celebrated, symbolized by the popular religious representation of a feminine Guanyin, who holds specific significance for women because she can grant desires for children. For this reason, the Guanyin cult has been considered closely linked to fecundity (Paul, 1985: 258). Reed (1992: 159) discusses the significance of Guanyin in detail: "Women saw the symbol of Guanyin as clearly liberating them from physiological suffering particular to the female sex". She recounts a popular story in which Guanyin rescues a girl that is left behind on a boat because she is

menstruating, and is thus not allowed to step on Guanyin's sanctum. Later, the statue of Guanyin on the island is found wet. Thus, Guanyin provides for the desperate need of offspring, and at the same time accepts those who are socially stigmatized on account of processes connected to that very childbirth! Moreover, Guanyin also saves women from sexual attacks. So, the Guanyin of popular imagination, in utter contrast to the Buddhist Guanyin, is a veritable heroine for female devotees since she specifically responds to women's needs and sufferings, particularly those related to reproduction and sexuality (Reed, 1992: 165, 168).[20]

The popular religious Guanyin was therefore a figure who explicitly sympathized with women's particular sufferings, illustrating that women appealed to non-human beings for their reproductive and sexual problems. Sangren (1983: 12) believes that women considered Guanyin worship to be purificatory. The fact that women plead(ed) for her help in such situations may insinuate that they did, and still do, feel oppressed by patriarchal structures and pronatalist views. Evidently, they require(d) comforting to conform. The popular story of Guanyin's ordination, and the story of Maoshan, who most regarded as a manifestation of Guanyin (Faure, 1998: 246; Dudbridge, 1978; Sangren, 1983: 7)[21] illustrate the suffering inflicted by such structures. On the other hand these stories also ascertain that women resisted and defied patriarchal concepts in earlier epochs. This opposition raises questions of agency: who conforms to such patterns, who resists, and more importantly: why?

There have always been individuals, of both sexes, who questioned the rationale of

[20] There are, however, also a number of erotic popular stories of Guanyin, evidently reflecting male desires (Faure, 1998: 247).

[21] The story of Maoshan survives in different versions, but in essence, she desired ordination against the wishes of her father who, out of anger, burned the temple where she lived. She survived, but her father fell terminally ill. When she was told that only the arm and eyes of a compassionate human being could save her father's life, she cut them off. Her body was magically restored when her father, not knowing who the donor was, came to thank her (Dudbridge, 1978). Maoshan is celebrated as the paragon of filial virtue and at the same time for her determination to follow the Buddhist path. Thus although challenging patriarchal authority with respect to pronatalist ideals, she nevertheless fulfilled her filial obligation. As noted in Chapter Three, Ven. Cheng-yen is often associated with her.

chauvinism – in stark contrast to Sangren's claim. He contends, "there is little evidence that they [women] ever questioned the fundamental female pollution beliefs" (Sangren, 1983: 13), which both ethnographic as well as historical data fully refute. A rather vociferous proponent is the nun Wuchu, who nakedly received a monk plagued by sexual desire:

> The master pointed to her [private parts] and asked: "What is this place leading to?" Wuchu said: "The Buddhas of the three worlds, the patriarchs of six generations, and the venerable monks in the world all have come out of here (Hsieh, 1981: 165).

Her words are as clear as her naked body. Frick also observed women in Qinghai during the 1950s as not abiding by menstrual norms, while others strongly supported them. This could lead to conflicts as in the following story. A menstruating woman left behind numerous bloodstains that were discovered by her mother-in-law. As a result, the mother-in-law drove her out, against the husband's opposition (Frick, 1955), revealing some women as disregarding taboos, and others as reinforcing them. In the 1970s, women in Ch'i-nan "treat(ed) the problem [of menstrual pollution] quite casually," observed Ahern (1975: 194). Thus, not all women conformed to menstruation taboos.

This example illustrates that not all men are supporters of such views. Frick portrayed an unforgiving mother-in-law, not an unforgiving husband, or father-in-law. Similarly, Cole (1998: 232) writes, "women were damned, but were a vital part of the system that reproduced and maintained the damning ideology, [for] women were important in passing on religious values", reflecting an issue that has been observed in many societies: women perpetuate negative views of their own sex.[22] The mother-in-law, who experienced menstrual taboos herself, enforced and passed them on to the next generation – though in the person of her daughter-in-law rather than her own kin. This internalized androcentrism deserves closer attention, for it is fundamental to gendered power. Women were inculcated

[22] Martin [Ahern] (1988:168) believes that "old women [...] are often enthusiastic spokeswomen for what [she defines as] 'male' views" – or androcentrism.

with the belief that their bodies are filthy from their early childhood, as Wolf's data (1972: 95ff) testifies: mothers – and not fathers – stigmatized their daughters' bodies as dirty.[23]

The pollution of women and related beliefs and practices were thus probably not universally accepted. Frick refers to a widower whose wife died during childbirth. This subjected her – according to the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* – to the "blood hell". Frick depicted the widower as devastated: he could not understand why his wife should be reborn in this particularly gruesome hell as they had spent ten harmonious years together. He refused to comprehend what terrible deed she was supposed to have committed in order to boil in the hellish blood pond. His reluctance indicates that some men felt uneasy about the propounded views of women's pollution, and some questioned it (Frick, 1955: 373).[24]

Frick's data firstly compromises the view that misogyny stemmed solely from men: in his field data, paradoxically, a man rejected while a woman espoused misogyny.[25] Secondly, the widower's plight demonstrates the tension between practice and precepts. Although the official discourse held his wife to be "boiling in hell", the widower had reservations. Hence it is wrong to view gender relations as a mimetic reproduction of opposed male and female positions. Men and women may accept, or oppose negative views of the female body.

Scholars have long been debating the question of the perpetuation of negative views vis-à-vis female embodiment. While Ahern (1975: 214) thought men not to consciously propagate them, Seaman (1981: 381) reasoned: "men do, indeed, encourage the perpetuation of negative beliefs surrounding women's sexuality, and men are quite aware of

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[23] This also comes to light in the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, which requires women to indoctrinate their offspring with its ideology (Cole, 1998: 209).
Cole provides four bases for the acceptance of this rationale:
[a.] "Filial piety singled out the contribution of mothers in childbearing.
[b.] By making the son filially indebted to his mother, [...] the Buddhist discourse gave the mother leverage in managing her son and controlling his loyalties as he grew up.
[c.] Even though negative, the story ends well, through salvation by the son.
[d.] Buddhist discourse sided with the mother against the mother-in-law" (Cole, 1998: 232).

[24] See also Ahern (Martin), 1988: 164, 168-169.

[25] The mother-in-law driving out her son's wife.

the need to rationalize the socially inferior position of women". Cole adopted Seaman's stance in his claim that Buddhist discourse encouraged such views in order to enforce the religious power structure (Cole, 1998: 207-209).

These three arguments are persuasive. But generalizations occasion simplification. Menstruation taboos and pollution beliefs are convoluted, and contextually transformed. It therefore seems more fitting to deduce that Chinese popular religious ideas (allegedly Buddhist but in fact Chinese cultural assumptions embedded in Buddhist terminology), and Taiwanese socio-cultural structures enabled, and sometimes perpetuated such negative views of women. Today, as in the past, some individuals consciously disseminate them, some internalize them without questioning, and others consciously and openly challenge them. Some comply with such views and yet doubt their validity, or clandestinely ignore them. Their respective rationales are contextual and personal.

A Memory of the Past

My recent fieldwork partially supports earlier findings and partially challenges them. During interviews and conversations, the meditation taboo – previously not documented by scholars – was more frequently invoked as valid than the temple taboo. Yet almost all interlocutors knew of the temple taboo. However, only seven respondents to the questionnaire (less than 6%) replied that women cannot go to temples at all times, and of these seven, four also claimed that women cannot attend Buddhist events at all times. So did three other respondents. Hence the percentage of respondents who invoked religious taboos was insignificant.

Several interlocutors stated temple taboos to be invoked particularly at the *Xingtian* 行天宮 and *Longshan* 龍山寺 temple in Taipei, both places of popular worship. The *Longshan* temple also houses a resident Buddhist monk, and offers the daily Buddhist morning and

evening liturgy, as well as the recitation of sūtras in addition to popular religious practices. Interlocutors considered this temple as one of the most prestigious temples in Taipei. Here, popular religious and Buddhist practices coexist, a factor which had caused several of my interlocutors to convert to Buddhism: the sound of sūtra recitation enticed them to attend Buddhist rituals when they had planned to engage in popular worship.

In this regard, the following is worth noting. During the ordination period, the ordaining master repeatedly stressed that monastics have to be good at chanting, and that the newly ordained monastics have to chant the melodies properly. Otherwise, they would be no better than Daoist priests, or even worse, resemble practitioners who recite sūtras in popular religious temples. This is yet another indication of the clergy's effort in "purifying" Buddhism, cleaving the perceived "heterodox" from the imagined "orthodox".

To return to the subject: today, menstrual temple taboos appear to exist primarily in the realm of popular religion.

> Q: "Have you ever heard of the saying that women cannot go to temples when they menstruate?"
> Ms Wen: "In the olden days, I've heard that they couldn't go to the main hall, but I think that shouldn't be a problem, [since] the mind is most important."
> Q: "Why did they say that?"
> Ms Wen: "Don't know. Yet I think it's a rather traditional [concept]. Older people would have these sorts of requirements, modern people surely don't."
> Q: "Have you ever followed these taboos?"
> Ms Wen: "No."
> Q: "How about meditation?"
> Ms Wen: "The same applies to meditation, and sūtra recitation, you can't just stay away from the morning liturgy just because you have your menstruation."[26]

Menstruation is no longer an acceptable excuse for missing the morning or evening liturgy. Ms Wen clearly states the taboo that menstruating women should not enter the main hall in temples existed in the past, but she never followed it. Similarly, Abbess B. also regarded the temple taboo as belonging to the past and to popular religion:

[26] Interview, 16.01.2003.

> Q: "There is a saying that women cannot meditate during menstruation..."
> Abbess B.: "That's a "Daoist"[27] view, not Buddhist. For example, today there are 50 women in my temple, and it's mostly the younger ones who offer incense, during three to four days per month – some do it five days a week. If they couldn't offer incense during their menstruation, who would go to the main hall? When I had just been ordained, this attitude existed, but it didn't mean that women cannot [go into the temple]. Rather, it meant that during our period, we should be careful. It says so in our vows. In the past, people used cloth during their menstruation, and the red cloth of blood had to be washed... Today, we all have sanitary napkins, so all we have to do is to change them, wrap them up and throw them away. The outside has to be well covered so that the red blood is not seen by others, for that would be impolite, not respecting others... So before we go to the main hall for the morning session, we prepare ourselves properly in the toilet. It is not because of the menstruation that we don't go!"
> Q: [...] "Did they think that women's bodies are dirty?"
> Abbess B.: "Rubbish. Women are very beautiful."[28]

According to Abbess B., it is impractical to excuse menstruating nuns from work, or religious practice, an argument confirmed by participant observation. During the ordination period, nuns were not excused or banned from participating in daily practices, training or duties due to menstruation. Abbess B. explicitly juxtaposes contemporary and former attitudes. Menstruating women did not go to temples because they were not allowed to, but because they had to "be careful", an allusion to questions of public gaze, and not inherent pollution. Abbess B. and other interlocutors thought modern personal hygiene products to be reasons strong enough to combat pollution dangers, and disregard former taboos. These were not seen as being inherently connected to female impurity or pollution, but to questions of personal hygiene, comfort, practicability, appropriateness and public gaze. In retrospect, then, these taboos were perhaps not enforced because of questions of female pollution. Nevertheless they were embedded in such a discourse.

Still, remnants of the past surface in the statement that it is "impolite" to let people see

[27] Note that most interlocutors refer to popular religion when using the term "Daoism", and not institutionalized Daoism. Such distinctions are mainly made by scholars and intellectuals, despite the fact that newspapers and so on employ the term "popular religion" 民間(or 族)宗教. Throughout this dissertation, when interlocutors refer to "Daoism", and their views are analyzed, popular religion is at issue, whereas the reference to Daoism as distinct from the comments of interlocutors refers to the institutionalized religion, whereas popular religion is used to describe diffuse beliefs, forces and practices.

[28] Interview, 16.01.2003.

the blood of one's napkins, hence the blood should be properly covered. Clearly, some interlocutors exhibit a lingering ambivalence toward menstrual blood that is certainly not unique to Taiwan. Still, Abbess B. deems the view that the female body is dirty "rubbish", insisting women to be very beautiful.

> Q: "Have you heard the saying that the female body is dirty and hence they cannot meditate or go to temples during menstruation?"
> A: "Buddhism doesn't have such a concept, ... but I know that "Daoists" can have such discrimination."
> Q: "How about you?"
> C: "As for the practice of women in Buddhism... there is no such discrimination ..."
> Q: "Do they say that menstruation is dangerous for women?"
> B: "Haven't heard that."
> C: "Rather, it is not so good, but not dangerous."
> Q: "And during meditation?"
> Q: "... and that it's not good for the body, have you heard that before?"
> C: "Yes, that is ... for nuns.... Women always [have] the inconvenience of womanhood."[29]

These three women, already encountered in Chapter Four, knew of the temple and menstrual meditation taboo. While they did not consider meditation during menstruation dangerous, they were aware of the argument that such behavior interferes with women's health,[30] which one interlocutor associated with nuns. One woman later maintained only Buddhists who are not highly realized to hold such views. They all had heard of the temple taboo but did not think it to be Buddhist – they all clearly differentiated between Buddhist and popular religious – in their words "Daoist" injunctions. In a way similar to other respondents, they explicitly considered it a "Daoist" taboo. So did Ms Tang:

> Q: "Have you heard the saying that women cannot go to temples during their menstruation?"
> Ms Tang: "Some people say so ...In the past when we worshipped "Daoism", it was the same. I thought like that. "Daoism" is the same, one has to worship. Buddhism is the same too, one should worship. One shouldn't make distinctions."
> Q: "So how about menstruation, can one go and worship?"
> Ms Tang: "Not as a "Daoist", but one can do so as a Buddhist."
> Q: "How about meditation?"

[29] Interview, 17.01.2003.
[30] The section on "Benevolent Paternalism" discusses this question.

Ms Tang: "I don't know. I had my uterus removed a long time ago, when I was 40..."[31]

Ms Tang also believes that Buddhism does not require women to refrain from frequenting temples during their menstruation. Interlocutors unanimously agreed this to be a "Daoist" concept, and Mr Da, who had first invoked this taboo in 1999, stated in 2002 that he might have learned about it in a "Daoist" context. Similarly, Ms Yü associated the temple taboo with popular religion:

> Q: "Is there a particular time when we women cannot practice...?"
> Ms Yü: "Apparently not. But in "Daoism", *Jielan Bodhisattva* has a temple in Taipei, *Xingtian* Temple in Minquan East Road. The volunteers there say that during menstruation, women cannot enter because they're unclean. But I don't think that way. ...Women have this biological phenomenon, that's why I think there's no difference. For example, during my time at high school, I had an English teacher who lived next to the temple. When we went to *Longshan* temple I happened to menstruate, and someone asked the teacher: "Don't some people say that during one's menstruation, one shouldn't go to temples", and he/she replied, "Just don't worship and it'll be all right, it doesn't matter." So that's why I think as long one is respectful...They say one shouldn't worship out of respect, [but] if I still go and respect you, isn't that okay? ... And as for what you just asked about clean and unclean, it actually is a kind of grasping mind. [They] think it's good for the Bodhisattvas, but Bodhisattvas have in fact not decreed that one can't go [to temples] during menstruation... If that would be the case, no woman would be able to go to temples for a number of days. They'd have to stay outside, wouldn't that be strange?"
> Q: "How about Buddhism?"
> Ms Yü: "No, one can worship. "Daoism" [is the one that] differentiates."[32]

The interview with Ms Yü also confirms the persistence of temple taboos in popular religion. This data lends credence to the hypothesis that while previously, the temple taboo and pollution beliefs existed in Buddhist circles, they have been eclipsed. That the temple taboo existed in Buddhism in the past is explicitly borne out by the statement of Abbess B. and the following excerpt: "In former times, people said that women are dirty because they menstruate, and women were not allowed to approach a Buddha statue or sit on a Dharma throne and preach when they had their period. Many times, women, too, thought themselves incapable because of their periods" (Wu Yin, 2001: 87). Hence in Buddhism in

[31] Interview, 15.01.2003.
[32] Interview, 11.01.2003

Taiwan, the female body *was* considered dirty. Taboos *did* restrain the religious movements of Buddhist women.

However, today, unlike the 10% of Furth and Ch'en's respondents (1992: 42), *no* interlocutor reckoned the temple taboo to apply to Buddhist places of worship. In contrast to earlier data, these findings depict Buddhist women as *not* following the menstrual temple taboo. Rather, they consider it a remnant of the past, a tradition that no longer needs guarding. By contrast, all of Ch'en and Furth's (1992: 41) informants were aware of the temple taboo, and the majority (67%) of them respected it, including younger women. They found, however, that women complied with the temple taboo out of respect, and not necessarily because they considered their bodies polluting – similarly to Abbess B. Only Ms Yü referred to the "respect argument", but she interpreted it very differently; unlike others, who considered it a form of respect not to go into temples during menstruation (Ch'en and Furth, 1992: 36, 41), she thought it disrespectful *not* to go.

Hence all interlocutors had heard about the temple taboo, but they unanimously considered it a "Daoist", or erstwhile injunction. The mother of Mr Da, for example, who is not a "pure" Buddhist in his view, argues that women cannot approach popular religious temples during menstruation, but that they can go to Buddhist temples. He himself considered the rationale for her view very interesting: Because Guanyin is female, she would not take offense,[33] illustrating how adherents of popular religion essentialize Guanyin as female – in contrast to Buddhist interlocutors. Correspondingly, some of Chu's informants claimed, "menstruating women can go into Buddhist temples, and none of the interlocutors, including a Buddhist nun, could explain why this was so. The only explanation offered was that Guanyin was female and therefore would not be so offended [...] few interlocutors, however, distinguished Buddhist from Daoist gods" (Chu, 1980: 47).

[33] Conversation, 03.11.2002.

This observation is only moderately corroborated by my data. Firstly, most interlocutors drew clear lines between Buddhist and "Daoist" (or better: popular religious) practices and injunctions, possibly because they all considered themselves specifically Buddhist and clearly differentiated between their past (when many had worshipped "Daoist" gods), and their present "pure" Buddhist practice. As Buddhists, they were thus a fairly homogenous group. Further, they explained the perceived triviality of the temple taboo in the context of non-duality; namely, the Buddhist pantheon was deemed beyond worldly dualism such as right and wrong, pure and impure. Because Bodhisattvas are beyond duality, they are held not to discriminate against menstruating women. If they did, they would not be Bodhisattvas, as Ms Yü reasoned. Unlike Chu's informants, most found it impossible to justify the temple taboo – they thought it not even worth contemplating.

In a way similar to Furth's and Chen's interlocutors, who claimed problems about menstrual pollution to have diminished due to modern hygiene, several interlocutors considered modernity to have taken care of the most essential issue, personal hygiene. Further, a better education regarding the physical processes surrounding menstruation might account for the defiance of taboos. Yet if personal hygiene and general education alone would explain the diminishing of traditional views, then taboos among adherents of popular religion should have eroded, too.[34] But they appear to persist. Hence the changed attitude toward menstruation among Buddhists cannot solely be attributed to forces that are often labeled as "modernization".

Several explanations come to mind for this change of emphasis. The section *Earlier Ethnography* already alluded to the "purification" of Buddhism. The deconstruction of

[34] Although alleged to be widespread among adherents of popular religion, an open question remains whether the temple taboo is truly still enforced today, or whether self-proclaimed Buddhists simply charge popular religion, or Daoism, with such views. Further research on popular religion and Daoism is required to answer this intricate question.

cultural assumptions that had previously infused Buddhist practices and beliefs may have taken place due to a conscious and controlled stress on *difference* from popular religion. It would seem that the previous conflation of Buddhism and popular religion caused a mélange of popular religious and Buddhist injunctions. In the past, Taiwanese themselves did not clearly distinguish between the two (Weller, 1987: 1-2), and so, scholarly confusion is not surprising. Tsung (1978: 4), for instance, observed that only a few temples were purely Buddhist during the 1970s, an aspect monks from Mainland China bemoaned when they first arrived in Taiwan (Günzel, 1998: 46). Weller (1987: 163) also witnessed in the 1980s how "most of the visitors to Buddhist temples are followers of the popular religion, and the clergy is aware of their popular interpretation of the Buddhist pantheon, but they do little about it [...]", a statement still valid today (Cheng, n.d.). At least up until the 1980s, the Buddhist clergy had not succeeded in "purifying" Taiwanese Buddhism, but instead accepted Taiwanese syncretistic religiosity.

Today, however, distinctions between Buddhists and non-Buddhists appear to be drawn more conscientiously, in particular by Buddhist interlocutors (see also Günzel, 1998: 105). Most popular religious movements are not as well organized as Buddhist enterprises (*Yiguan Dao* is of course the most notable exception; see Bosco, 1994), hence the amorphous, or diffuse (to use Yang's term) character of popular religion might stifle conscious doctrinal changes.[35] In the case of Buddhism, by contrast, "the absence of a powerful clergy with interest in maintaining a religious status quo made for very minimal pressures to preserve an orthodoxy in religious or ritual interpretation" (Weller, 1999: 347) *before* the relocation of Buddhist clergy from Mainland China. The "institutional Buddhist influx", on the other hand, resulted in a restructuring, or "purification" of Buddhism, which probably also

[35] I use the term 'amorphous' in reliance on Weller, 1999: 353. Elsewhere, Weller (1987: 111) posits that popular religion presents a less uniform image of itself than Buddhism.

influenced menstruation taboos as the scriptures that had previously been deemed Buddhist (and that projected misogynist attitudes toward menstruation) could then be established as apocryphal. This was possibly accelerated by "modernization", that is, Buddhist education extending to laypeople through the mass media and new scholarly techniques which enable the comparison of Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese texts, and hence the differentiation between Indian and Chinese sūtras. Although the "purification" of Buddhism is by no means a uniquely modern phenomenon, modern research techniques, information technology, as well as exchange of ideas and scholarship have enabled Buddhism in Taiwan to distinguish itself from popular cults much more effectively than in the past. So, the "purification" of Taiwanese Buddhism is quite possibly one of the factors which caused the erosion of pollution beliefs and menstruation taboos.

Furthermore, the high percentage of nuns (about 70-75% of the clergy) almost certainly had a significant bearing on this structural change, as they are now more than ever in a position to influence Buddhist discourse (as religious guides), and correspondingly the views of laywomen. Zhang and Lin (n.d.: 22) interpret the rising status of female religious practitioners as correlated to society at large. Hence the growing public prominence and influence of women in Taiwan society has evidently influenced Buddhism to the degree of abolishing certain views. In addition, the literature and theatrical plays which elaborated on female pollution and connected issues have diminished with modern forms of entertainment. In short, most likely, a combination of factors stimulated the erosion of the menstrual temple taboo.

Conversely, though, scholars might have collected similar data and reached analogous conclusions in the 1970s and 1980s had they focused specifically on Buddhism. However, there is little doubt that *then*, even in the Buddhist realm of propounded equality, corporeal difference *was* essentialized and reified by menstruation taboos. That all interlocutors were

aware of the temple taboo substantiates the persistence of its legacy, but Buddhists relegate it to the past – it seems no longer enforced in Buddhism. Hence, theories regarding pollution beliefs in Buddhism have to be reassessed, for some scholars seem to assume that observations made in the 1970s and 1980s still hold currency today.

Although there appear to be individuals who still adhere to such views, all interlocutors characterized them as "old". In fact, 68.4% of the respondents of the questionnaire who referred to specific injunctions against women were forty and above. Consequently, the questionnaire also establishes older women to invoke taboos more frequently than younger women. Among Chu and Furth's informants (1992: 43), older women criticized the temple taboo, yet among my interlocutors, particularly younger interlocutors had qualms about this practice. The most frequent answer I was given in this respect was, "Why shouldn't I go?" Thus among Buddhists in Taiwan, menstrual taboos appear to bear little significance for the younger generation similarly to Western societies (Zinn-Thomas, 1997: 222).

While most interlocutors considered menstruation a nuisance with regard to *abdominal pain*, in strong contrast to Furth's and Chen's interlocutors (1992: 34), most did *not* consider the female body as dirty or *polluting*. "What do you consider polluting?" "The thing I'm most afraid of is the Māra [i.e. demon/illusion] of [one's own] mind, the mental demon, the mind that injures others. I feel that this is the dirtiest of all. Because other dirty things are external, they can be taken care of..."[36] Here, Ms Yü unmistakably declared that the dirtiest she could think of were harmful thoughts, and not the liquids that traverse the boundaries of the body. Unlike Tsung's interlocutors (1978: 154), some of whom had an "abhorrence for menstruation so great that many envy menopausal women", most interlocutors, and in particular younger women, appeared at ease with their bodily discharges. For example, nuns talked openly about their menstruation during the Triple Platform Ordination. They seemed

[36] Interview, 11.02.2003.

to consider it an inconvenience, but not a filthy event. Even stronger was Abbess B's reaction, who countered the belief that women's bodies are filthy with the simple riposte "rubbish". Most women therefore either had doubts vis-à-vis the validity of pollution views and taboos, or simply ignored them. Nonetheless, three interlocutors deemed the womb and uterine liquids dirty,[37] as did several men.

Male Anxiety?

> Ms Gao: "You should eat some of these Spirulina pills. They're good for one's health. But be aware, one shouldn't eat them when one has a big belly."
> Q: "I have a big belly!"
> Ms Gao: "Not that kind of belly, a pregnant one!"
> Q: "Oh well..."
> Ms Gao: "Hey, did you know that in the past, great Chinese masters were not born from their mother's womb? They were not born from places such as the dirty womb."
> Q: "How could that possibly happen..."
> Ms Gao: "For example, the master of my master wasn't born from a womb. His mother died before his delivery, and then she ejected a strange object. The next day, they opened the object and found a baby in it. Two days later a monk came and took it away. Master Xüyun was his name. He lived for 120 years."[38]

Most female interlocutors, friends or flatmates did *not* evince ambivalent attitudes toward their bodies and menstruation. Likewise, Ms Gao did not appear to generally despise her femininity, or menstruation. Yet she did on this occasion indicate the womb to be dirty.

By contrast, Shi De expressly despised her menstruation. This might be considered in the context of her specific gendered sexual orientation. She was a lesbian who attempted to be "masculine" in everyday life, and openly stated she had taken the role of the man in her previous sexual relationships. She did not leave the house during her menstruation and took a shower every time she used the bathroom. She considered menstruation a serious obstacle. Only one respondent to the questionnaire mentioned menstruation as impeding her

[37] Note that these women also knew about and aspired to the spiritual cessation of menstruation, a connection discussed in detail in Chapter Six.
[38] Conversation Taipei city, August 2002; it appears that she refers to Xuyun (1840?-1959), the Chan reviver of the early modern period.

spiritual practice. So did Ms Li and Shi Wu, who held rather traditional views of femininity and probably the most negative attitudes toward women and female rebirth. Shi Wu explicitly deemed menstruation an obstacle to spiritual practice, as did Ms Li, who aspired to masculinity in performance, appearance and thought, and to ordination.[39]

In concord with these interlocutors, but in contrast to most other women, male interlocutors claimed that menstruation is dirty. Generally, most women did not connect their menstruation to potential spiritual disruption in the way men did, nor did they see it as an unnatural event. During interviews, they considered menstruation a natural biological event while male interlocutors stated exactly the opposite. Similarly, Zinn-Thomas (1997: 209, 224) describes how her female respondents in Germany referred to situations where they were devalued by men on account of their menstruation. Especially younger women countered such verbal disparagement, which the women themselves understood as strategies to irritate them, disqualify their arguments, or to confine them in patriarchal boundaries.

Comparable phenomena materialized in Taiwan. For example, a fairly negative attitude toward menstruation transpired in the conversation with Mr Da (cited below), Mr Chen (analyzed in Chapter Four), and in the interview with Dr. Shu, who is a Buddhist, but also seems to have affiliations with popular religious groups. After having discussed secondary amenorrhea, upon being asked, "so what's the advantage in not menstruating", he became quite irritated and maintained, "if menstruation doesn't come, one is just like a man, comfortable, one doesn't have that hassle for several days every month."[40] Later, he reasoned that *Yin* and *Yang* are not in balance during menstruation, hence women are then particularly emotional – a view which draws on Chinese medicine (Furth, 1999). When I

[39] Interview, 11.02.2003.
[40] Interview, 26.12.2002; Informal conversation, Dec. 2002.

posited that if one has no aversion to menstruation, menstruation is not a problem in itself, he reacted with slight irritation and forcefully said, "well, then you have to change Buddhism." His views illustrate the amalgamation of popular religious beliefs with traditional Chinese medicine, embedded in a Buddhist vocabulary. During the interview, he did not use Buddhist concepts to establish that Buddhism deems menstruation wrong or negative. His sources all stemmed from Chinese medicine and popular assumptions. His statements about Buddhism were non-sequiturs. And yet he saw his arguments as expressions of "orthodox" Buddhism while Abbess B, who was present for sections of his interview, argued after he had left, that she considered many of his views to be non-Buddhist. This demonstrates the common quandary in establishing what Buddhism precisely denotes.[41] By and large, his negative attitude toward menstruation might be explained in the context of his medical profession – as a medical practitioner, he encounters many women with menstrual distress.

In total, the percentage of men who made reference to the beliefs that women cannot visit temples, meditate, attend Dharma meetings, and practice at all times was conspicuously higher than that of women. While 14.3% of the male respondents of the questionnaire referred to the temple taboo, only 3.2% of the female respondents did. Thus, both my data based on conversations, interviews and participant observation, as well as the questionnaire echo Winterer's (1992) and other psychoanalytical theories (Stephens, 1961; Bettelheim, 1962; and others), which conceive aversion to female reproductive processes as primarily a male response, stimulated primarily by anxiety, fear, and possibly envy. Correspondingly, Furth (1994: 134) remarks: "The female "other" is not a socially threatening or engulfing

[41] See the groundbreaking study of Jordan and Overmyer (1986), which analyses the personal worldviews of two sisters, embedded in a larger cosmological speculation. Their work demonstrates that adherents create their own spiritual universe based on the matrix of their respective religious speculations in conjunction with their own personal beliefs.

mother, but simply the instrument drowning males to a boundary where the sense of self is lost". No matter why, male respondents had unquestionably more qualms with uterine blood than women.

Menstruation and Spiritual Potential

Connected to male anxiety are issues of power, not only of reproductive kind (Paige and Paige, 1981), but perhaps also of spiritual nature: This aspect emerged in many conversations during fieldwork. Several women did meditate during menstruation despite taboos, and found their awareness increased, intuition expanded and so on. While at first Ms Li insisted that women cannot meditate during menstruation for fear of *qi*-depletion, she then reflected aloud about some "strange occurrences". A few times, she disregarded menstruation taboos and found that every time she meditated, not only did her abdominal pain subside, but her meditation was also exceptionally stable.[42] Some interlocutors claimed to have felt energized while meditating during menstruation.

Such experiences suggest that women might have been excluded from religious certain practice during cyclical peak-times *because* these were times when men could simply not compete with them due to physical differences – "womb-envy", as Margaret Mead termed it (Herdt, 1993: 205).[43] Even though highly speculative, it is an argument frequently reviewed in popular feminist writings (Hohage, 1997: 284).[44] Yet already Pliny associated menstruation with supernatural powers (Ihalaien, 1975: 9), and women's "spiritual powers" have also been invoked in discussions of menstruation huts and similar seclusion practices (Buckley, 1988; Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988a; Gottlieb, 1990; Jolly and Lukere, 2002). For

[42] Informal conversation, Taipei, 23.11.2001.
[43] Refer also to Schlehe (1987: 163ff) for details regarding "theories of womb-envy".
[44] I refrain from including these writings, as I found them very polemical in tone, and not particularly convincing or scholarly. Thus I do not provide specific references here. Suffice it to refer to their existence, as Schlehe (1987) discusses them in detail.

this reason, feminist scholars in particular maintain that precisely the female reproductive parts, which some associate with spirituality as well as fertility, are involved in contests about power and pollution.

Some women did not feel inhibited by their menstruation during spiritual practice, but rather perceived a rejuvenating sensation, or awareness, and yet they invoked the meditation taboo. This shows how deeply such prejudices are rooted in women's (and men's) psyches. *Continuity* is central to any form of training, including meditation. Obliging women to interrupt their meditation once a month obstructs their progress. This is even more problematic in the case of pregnancy, where meditation has to be suspended for nearly one year. Such a long break might cause a subsequent disinterest in meditation. Convincing pregnant and menstruating women to refrain from spiritual practice gives men and menopausal women an advantage in their spiritual cultivation. Hence arguments for such taboos support male hegemony, no matter whether they use a language of denigration, or protection. This language of protection, or benevolent paternalism, is indeed an ingenious mechanism.

Benevolent Paternalism

In general, the ostracism which barred menstruating and pregnant women from entering temples invited much criticism from Western observers, being often interpreted as a manifestation of misogyny. That *we* view taboos relating to childbirth and menstruation as restricting, disconcerting and even oppressive reflects our own supposedly egalitarian credo – possibly more so than that of the persons involved. *They* may not feel restricted at all. Tsung (1978) noticed how nuns in rural Taiwan *enjoyed* the break from daily worship due to menstruation taboos, and Wu Yin (2002) recounts that in the past, some nuns used menstrual taboos to justify indolence. This illustrates that circumscribed persons may not

experience taboos as restrictive, and may even use them to their own advantage. It is thus problematic to view the subjects of taboos solely as victims. Equally erroneous is the assumption that taboos unambiguously discriminate against women, or exist simply to buttress patriarchy. Accordingly, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988b: 6-7) elucidated how taboos are often connected to protective measures. Correspondingly, although taboos excluded female religious practitioners in Taiwan, they were said to protect the ritualists, participants, and the women themselves. Furthermore, religious, spiritual and cosmological views are not the only influences on menstruation taboos.

Chinese medical models of female reproductive processes, which also might have shaped menstruation taboos, reveal a similar line of reasoning. According to Furth (1999), the Chinese medical discourse on menstruation advanced a positive image of female generative potential. This discourse, she maintains, was above all inspired by paternalism, pity, protection, and by a concern with vitality and loss (Furth, 1986: 44 and 64).[45] However, her argument collapses in the tension between an implicit positive female image that is nonetheless characterized by weakness, depletion and so on. In fact, her evidence suggests that *because* men sought to control what women alone controlled, reproduction,[46] they created a medical discourse that emphasized the imbalance of the female body, the inherent weakness of the female sex, and thus the *absolute* need to monitor women's monthly cycles – by male doctors of course! This ingenious paternal discourse could curtail women's reproductive choices. Correspondingly, Chinese medicine gave rise to a paternalistic rhetoric to ensure the control of reproduction and hence the agnatic line by men, and thereby inscribed male hegemony. A similar paternalistic rhetoric connects the belief in hungry ghosts and the danger of uterine blood.

[45] On page 56, Furth (1986) writes, "menstrual regulation was important for fertility."
[46] Furth (1986: 64) alludes to this aspect, but does not firmly establish her argument.

According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, hungry ghosts subsist on blood (Cole, 1998: 201).[47] The belief in hungry ghosts still permeates Taiwanese society. They are still considered powerful, as is obvious in the importance of the annual 'Ghost Feeding Festival' (Orzech, 1996).[48] Hungry ghosts feed on blood, and because menstruating and birthing women lose blood, they attract them. Hence a bleeding woman was, as a source of blood and attraction to ghosts, taken as a threat to herself and others.[49] Thus not surprisingly, I was expressly advised not to approach temples, or meditate when menstruating during field studies in Taiwan in 1999, because of possible ghostly attacks. While neither hungry ghosts attacked me in temples, nor did spirits possess me during meditation, I found this particular taboo quite oppressive. It was, in fact, one of the instigators of my research in this area. Nevertheless, Mr Da, who had advised me to comply with these taboos, did so because he was concerned about my safety. He then also told me that during meditation, pregnant women are easy targets for demons, hence his wife did not meditate during pregnancy because demons could have interfered with the development of the child. Nonetheless, a demon is said to have attacked the newborn![50]

Pregnant and menstruating women, as well as children and the aged are often considered the most vulnerable members of society. Thus, in a society in which many believe in spirits, demons and hungry ghosts, taboos directed towards vulnerable groups, albeit restrictive, may have a caring and protective intention. Consequently, taboos *can* be promulgated with compassionate intentions. The individual who evokes them is more likely

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[47] Winslow (1980: 613) states that in Southeast Asia, menstrual blood is believed to attract demons; MacCormack (1982: 31) observed the same.

[48] For a detailed study regarding ghosts and gender, see Harrell, 1986.

[49] However, that hungry ghosts live off pus and blood implies that any wounded person cannot engage in religious activities. But I have neither encountered this argument in textual sources, nor in oral accounts. On the contrary, when wounded, I was encouraged to meditate to heal my wounds. Hence, explaining menstrual taboos through the correlation between hungry ghosts and menstruating women is contentious.

[50] Information gathered during preliminary fieldwork in Kaohsiung in 1999. For a discussion regarding the pollution of death, see Bloch and Parry, 1982; Parry, 1982; Watson, 1982.

to be inspired by compassion than by oppressive motives. Even so, the worldview which promulgates them is clearly saturated by androcentrism. Menstruation taboos are thus a graphic illustration of the dilemma of the two faces of "benevolent paternalism".

This is perhaps the most obdurate manifestation of negative attitudes toward women. While overtly misogynist pollution beliefs appear to be almost abolished among Buddhists in Taiwan, paternalistic rhetoric still urges women to refrain from meditation for a certain period of time. There was considerable consistency in responses vis-à-vis the temple taboo among interlocutors, but views diverged considerably with respect to the meditation taboo. Whereas some claimed that they had never heard of this taboo, others argued it to be based on issues of health, and others again connected it to spiritual dangers.

At least fourteen respondents (11.5%) referred to the injunction that women cannot meditate at all times, or they specifically wrote that they cannot do so during menstruation. Insignificantly more men (10.7% of the male respondents) than women (9.6% of the female respondents) referred to this injunction. Proportionally more respondents and interlocutors accepted the meditation taboo than the temple taboo as valid.

Of the female respondents who referred to this taboo, an overwhelming majority (80%) were adherents of Pure Land Buddhism, so were 50% of the male respondents. This can be taken to indicate a more ambiguous attitude toward female biological processes among members of this group. Alternatively, though, it may simply reflect the predominance of Pure Land Buddhism in Taiwan. Conversely, adherents of this tradition might invoke this injunction because the main daily practice of Pure Land Buddhists does *not* focus on meditation. Mr Da, who had first advised me not to meditate during menstruation in 1999, was then *expressly* an adherent of Pure Land Buddhism, whereas in 2002, he leaned more strongly towards Vajrayāna Buddhism. Speaking again to him and his wife in 2002, he had somewhat softened his stance. Still, when I mused that I have never encountered problems

with ghosts during meditation, he and his wife persisted in arguing that she cannot meditate during menstruation because otherwise, she experiences spiritual problems, but she did not specify her difficulties. Both claimed her to be mentally too unstable to meditate. When I opposed by saying that the belief in such dangers triggers off certain experiences (a Mahāyāna Buddhist school [*Cittamātra* "Mind Only"] claims everything to be the creation of one's own mind, including ghosts), they thought my special position (as a nun) to protect me from such problems during meditation. They were absolutely unremitting when it came to women's meditation in general and *her* meditation in particular. She was presented as weak and unstable during menstruation, thus both stressed it to be better for her not to meditate. It goes without saying that there were no specific times connected to bodily functions when *he* could not meditate.[51]

This couple also adheres to other traditional injunctions, such as the postnatal practices and prohibitions as presented by Ahern (1975) and Topley (1974). Discussing in detail why women are not supposed to leave the house, and not to wash their hair for a month after childbirth, they passionately insisted this not to be a requirement because the woman was dirty, but because her body requires a rest after the strenuous birthing process and especially nutritious food to ensure good health and plentiful lactation in the future. They eagerly pointed out how a friend, who (unlike Ms Da) had not complied with traditional practices, and suffered severe health problems as a consequence. In both contexts, menstruation and pregnancy, they presented women as being weak, or unstable: *ergo* the restrictions. They understood such restrictions primarily as protecting women in the context of traditional Chinese medicine and argued closely along the lines discussed by Furth (1986, 1999).

According to Daoism, Chinese medicine, and popular wisdom, women lose *qi* through menstruation in the same way as men lose *qi* through ejaculation (Zhang, 1997: 38-39;

[51] Conversation, Kaohsiung City, 03.11.2002.

Furth, 1986: 45). Interlocutors and friends frequently asserted that women cannot meditate during menstruation, because their *qi* diminishes – one respondent wrote that during menstruation, women cannot sit cross-legged. So did Shi De, who maintained that women should not meditate in full-lotus position during their menstruation as they would lose *qi*.[52] She became quite agitated when I replied that I always meditate cross-legged during menstruation and never had problems, reasoning that *qi* is a Chinese concept I don't believe in and thus it cannot affect me. She then proclaimed (rather forcefully), "actually, it has modern medical foundations, I read it somewhere."[53] The debate stopped at this point. Similarly, when asked whether she knows about the meditation/menstruation taboo, Ms Li responded that she knows that menstruating women should not meditate for *qi* reasons. Yet she immediately questioned this stance herself because Buddhists are supposed to practice meditation every day. At the same time, she invoked questions of *qi* depletion, and the argument that meditating is harmful because women lose blood, and therefore *qi*.[54]

One respondent to the questionnaire, like Shi Chang with respect to occupying the central seat, wrote that women are less stable during menstruation. Another respondent posited that when the body is in a bad state, women cannot focus "as the bodies of women and men are different". Yet another respondent reasoned meditation during menstruation to influence one's health [adversely], and others held that one's legs may be injured, or that it is difficult to settle the mind during menstruation. One respondent saw the injunction against meditating during menstruation as influenced by health considerations. Those interlocutors and respondents who stated that women should not meditate during menstruation mainly argued so on the basis of health considerations, and mental instability.

[52] Consider Shi Xi, who maintained that after menopause, one should not meditate in the full lotus position for otherwise, menstruation would reappear. She did not know why. Shi Xi was the only interlocutor who claimed so. Kaohsiung, Nov. 2002.
[53] Informal Conversation, Taipei, Sept. 2002.
[54] Conversation, Taipei city, 23.11.2001.

Most justifications were therefore based on paternalistic rhetoric which was exclusively articulated in traditional Chinese medical – and not Buddhist – terms.

In view of this evidence, the question arises whether the taboo on menstruation should be considered a taboo at all. According to Buckley and Gottlieb (1988b: 4), only menstrual practices which are coupled with spiritual, or divine connotations are taboos. The boundaries in this case, however, are rather elusive. While most interlocutors invoked explanations based on Chinese medicine, others did voice religiously inspired views: A pervasive argument was the inherent deficiency of the female sex, or instability of women's minds, a condensation of both Buddhist and Chinese views.[55] Judgment as to whether the restraint of meditation during menstruation is a taboo, or simply a restriction must therefore be suspended.

Conclusion

To conclude, my empirical data evinces pollution beliefs among Buddhists today to resonate little with those anthropologists recorded two to three decades ago. Further, while attitudes toward the temple taboo are homogenous, views regarding the meditation taboo are less so. The general justifications for the meditation taboo were primarily based on traditional Chinese medical injunctions – in particular the postulation that the loss of blood entails the depletion of *qi*. Furth (1986) elucidated painstakingly that Chinese medical views of the female body and menstruation are motivated by compassion, care and pity. But it is exactly this ingenious paternalistic discourse that embeds menstrual restrictions in the manipulation of women's self-interest, particularly in concerns about their own health, which gives the menstrual meditation taboo the strength to persist. Even paternalistic menstruation taboos restrict women, be they promulgated with a caring intention or not. One face of male

[55] As stated earlier, Chinese medical wisdom held women's minds to be subject to emotional instability.

hegemony is thus a seemingly benign paternalism.

It is vital to reiterate that menstrual taboos and attitudes toward reproductive processes not only diverge within different religious groups, or social strata. They are also subject to change. Although they have changed, they do, as several German scholars have shown, reappear in modern disguise (Hohage, 1997: 118, 169; Mahr, 1985: 71; Schlehe, 1987: 38). But that is not at issue here. While a culture might provide certain cosmo-religious frameworks, individuals still have some freedom of choice. The choice of Buddhists in Taiwan seems clear. The temple taboo only survives in memory and popular religion, but the meditation taboo is more enduring. The meditation taboo retains legitimacy because it is embedded in Chinese medical beliefs, in paternalistic discourse, rather than within overt misogynist polemic, like the temple taboo was. Clearly, menstruation beliefs and practices are deeply embedded in culture, and it takes more than a few individuals or years to change them. However, the change of consciousness vis-à-vis pollution beliefs and menstruation taboos illustrates how profoundly Taiwanese society has changed – Buddhism included.

☙ *Chapter Six* ❧
Religiously Sanctioned Amenorrhea and the Spiritual Cessation of Menstruation

Chapter Five illustrated that menstrual taboos were grounded in a rejection of particular aspects of female embodiment. This rejection was quite possibly based on specific Chinese interpretations of Buddhist doctrines, and on views propounded in apocryphal scriptures. It would seem that the socio-religious framework which informs menstruation taboos and pollution beliefs has a similar bearing on the absence of menstruation, amenorrhea.[1] Hence some of the factors which reinscribed menstruation taboos in the past may have molded the belief that outstanding female practitioners stop menstruating with an increased level of spiritual insight.

Many cultures acknowledge the non-appearance of menstruation in girls – primary amenorrhea, and the temporary discontinuation of menstruation in reproductive women – secondary amenorrhea. Unless it is a sign for pregnancy, breast-feeding, or menopause, most deem amenorrhea pathological.[2] And so, anthropologists have recorded various methods used to induce menstruation in different cultures. These demonstrate a concern with menstrual regulation (Renne *et al.*, 2001). Although Western theorists suggest amenorrhea to be caused by physical factors such as hormonal imbalances, or nutritional deficiencies, other psychological determinants have been recognized as equally significant.

Several theorists assume amenorrhea to reflect the suppression of femininity, or the defiance of cultural expectations of being a woman (Ihalaien, 1975; Mahr, 1985: 41; Warriner, 2001: 128). Psychoanalysts in particular hope to explain why women stop menstruating, yet they habitually ignore cultural and social factors (Mahr, 1985: 13). To date,

[1] Knegendorf (Zinn-Thomas, 1997: 16) has studied this connection, but I have unfortunately been unable to obtain her study, even in Germany.
[2] Throughout the text, when referring to amenorrhea, secondary amenorrhea is in discussion.

it seems that only biomedicine and psychology seek to understand the causes of secondary amenorrhea, while anthropological accounts primarily describe different remedies. These approaches converge in that they either aim at inducing regular bleeding (medicine and psychology), or scrutinize ways of doing so (anthropology). Rarely do they discuss socio-cultural stimuli, or consider a combination of factors.[3]

These diverse approaches agree that most societies regard amenorrhea as pathological. A number of analysts refer to perceived causes of secondary amenorrhea, yet insufficient data encumbers adequate theories. Archival and empirical data remain scarce even though secondary amenorrhea is more prevalent than commonly assumed (Johnston, 2001: 224; Montgomery, 1974; Warriner, 2001: 113, 119). The recent collection of essays *Regulating Menstruation* scrutinizes how societies deal with the delay and regulation of menstruation, but does not explore the cessation of menstruation divorced from (premature) menopause, pregnancy, or lactation. Perhaps, this phenomenon is unknown to the writers, or perhaps in the West the permanent cessation of menstruation is defined as menopause, conflating the long-term absence of menstruation with its biological termination.

Studies of menstruation, menopause and the pre-menstrual syndrome portray cultures and sub-cultures as assessing reproductive events differently. We tend to ignore views that do not correspond to our conceptualization of reproductive processes (possibly because these are often seen as 'natural' conceptions) and thus fail to notice cross-cultural examples which challenge our own preconceptions. Chinese discourse, for example, differentiates between the involuntary *natural* cessation of menstruation and its willing or *cultural* cessation.[4] Hence in the Chinese context (and perhaps elsewhere) different discourses on amenorrhea coexist. And so, this chapter demonstrates the discourse on secondary

[3] For an exploration of different approaches to secondary amenorrhea, see Yeshe, 2004.
[4] For details on Chinese views, see below and Bray (1995 and 1997), as well as Furth (1999).

amenorrhea to be as multi-vocal as the discourse on menstruation.

Most studies consider secondary amenorrhea an evanescent phenomenon, a pathology that should be terminated. Perhaps because secondary amenorrhea implies infertility, it has almost exclusively been studied in a negative, instead of a more positive light. Consider, for example the following description of "premature menopause": "Beginning in the 1960s, it was noted that women with *premature* ovarian *failure* often *suffered* from an associated endocrinopathy or other *systemic disorder*" (Gruhn and Kazer, 1989: 181, emphasis mine). Gruhn and Kazer argue the average age for menopause in the United States to be 51 years, thus the cessation of menstruation prior to the average age *must* be due to some *dysfunction.* This quotation evinces exclusively negative terms to describe secondary amenorrhea, here labeled as premature menopause. So, not only are female reproductive processes described in terms of failure and lack as Martin (1992) has shown, but their cessation is also assessed in a negative way. Similarly, until recently, scholars often understood menopause and menstrual taboos in terms of negative attitudes toward female reproduction.

One of these negative voices bespeaks of the belief in certain societies that amenorrhea is caused by malignant supernatural forces; for example, as the result of witchcraft due to the jealousy of a second wife (Diarra *et al.*, 2001: 178-179; Renne *et al.*, 2001: xxvi), or as some Southern American and African data attests, as caused by other spiritual forces (Cosminsky, 2001; Hammer, 2001; Johnston, 2001), spirit possession, witches or wizards (Renne *et al.*, 2001: xxvii; Diarra *et al.*, 2001). Their hypothesis that menstrual disorders "may be interpreted as a reflection of social or spiritual disorder" (Renne *et al.*, 2001: xviii) echoes Douglas' (1966; 1999) theory which conflates the individual and social body. This fails to explain the positive appraisal of secondary amenorrhea in some contexts and cultures.

Recent studies of menstruation taboos demonstrate the way in which taboos on menstruating women sometimes inscribe their sacred or powerful status: they are not

necessarily the result of negative attitudes toward female reproductive events (Buckley, 1988; Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988; Gottlieb, 1990). Although not contemplated in current literature, the same applies to secondary amenorrhea. Religious beliefs are significant in shaping the perception of menstruation and menopause (Hohage, 1998: 57). Hence in societies that are influenced by religions which celebrate ascetism, the renunciation of sexuality and fertility, or are obsessed with purity, secondary amenorrhea carries a very different connotation. In such societies, amenorrhea is sometimes interpreted as a sign of spiritual attainment – of *positive* spiritual potential. Therefore, amenorrhea is not universally considered *negatively*.

Secondary amenorrhea that is deemed desirable in the context of spiritual practice is best defined as "religiously sanctioned amenorrhea". Amenorrhea in the corresponding framework might be called "spiritual amenorrhea", and its permanent counterpart, the "spiritual cessation of menstruation". The following table presents the definition of several terms that describe the absence of menstruation in different contexts.

Table 1: Different forms of the absence of menstruation

Primary amenorrhea	The non-appearance of menstruation in young women
Secondary amenorrhea	The intermittent absence of menstruation in reproductive women who have already experienced menstruation
Menstrual Retention/ Blockage	The retention of menstruation in reproductive women who have already experienced menstruation, mainly due to gynecological factors[5]
Spiritual amenorrhea	The intermittent stopping of menstruation in reproductive women due to spiritual (religious) factors, or practices
Religiously sanctioned amenorrhea	Secondary amenorrhea that is deemed desirable in a religious, or spiritual context
Cessation of menstruation	The end of menstruation due to uncertain factors
Spiritual cessation of menstruation	The definite ceasing of menstruation due to (religious) spiritual factors, conceptualized as distinct from menopause
Menopause	The discontinuation of menstruation due to hormonal changes with increasing age

[5] For details regarding menstrual retention, see Warriner (2001: 116), who states that, "true menstrual retention is rare".

The questionnaire establishes that Buddhists in Taiwan recognize "spiritual amenorrhea". It is not merely a category developed at the desk of a scholar. Fifty-two respondents to the questionnaire had heard of the spiritual cessation of menstruation, while forty-two had never heard about it. Only twenty-five did not believe that this phenomenon exists, whereas fifty-two did – of these, five had not heard about the phenomenon before. The fact that half of the respondents were aware of, or believed in spiritual amenorrhea confirms that it is not a mysterious belief only a few Taiwanese eccentrics know of, or accept as true. On the other hand, among the non-Taiwanese respondents (twelve in total), nine had *never* heard of the spiritual cessation of menstruation before, and only two (from Malaysia and Vietnam) knew of its existence. Only four believed it was possible, and six did not believe it to be true. The questionnaire results therefore insinuate that religiously sanctioned amenorrhea might be a specifically Taiwanese, or Chinese Buddhist concept, an issue revisited at the end of this chapter.

Despite this positive appraisal of amenorrhea, Chinese medical practitioners studied amenorrhea in detail in order to develop cures for it (Bray, 1995; 1997). Thus, many Taiwanese and Chinese view(ed) amenorrhea as pathological, not just for the individual, but collectively. It was closely linked to concerns about female fertility, and claims over the female body in the background of patrilineal, patriarchal structures. Indeed, Chinese studies of amenorrhea reveal the paternalistic urge to control women's fertility (Furth, 1986). Therefore, amenorrhea does not merely signify the failure of the reproductive female body to emit uterine blood. As a symbol of infertility, amenorrhea is at the core of a tension between the self-determination of women and agnatic claims over female bodies, which stress both fecundity and the necessary birth of male heirs.

This tension has already been revealed apropos pollution beliefs and menstrual taboos in the preceding chapter. One may propose that negative attitudes toward the female body

in popular religious discourse, and in Buddhism in the past, gave rise to pollution beliefs and menstrual taboos. Precisely because the female menstruating body was judged as defiled, menstruation might have been rejected by individuals, and possibly repressed, culminating in the suppression of menstruation, amenorrhea. The data presented here reveals that exactly those women who have difficulties with their femininity strongly believe in the spiritual cessation of menstruation, as if this spiritual transcendence would relieve them from the burden of their female embodiment. The women who appeared at ease with their femininity did, on the whole, not aspire to, or pretend to have experienced this phenomenon. But these are tentative suggestions about an intriguing yet obscure ideal.

This chapter first compares Chinese medical attitudes toward amenorrhea with religious views, in particular those of Daoist and Buddhist practitioners. It follows that the religious interpretation of secondary amenorrhea presents an inversion of the commonly accepted norm. Further, the interpretation of secondary amenorrhea is largely context dependent, and group specific. This chapter subsequently shows that secondary amenorrhea is closely related not only to fertility, but also to questions of sexuality and renunciation, therefore necessitating an analysis of concepts of purity, desire and control. Different methods of inducing spiritual amenorrhea are then discussed. So is the connection between the suppression of femininity and amenorrhea. Finally, reported cases of spiritual amenorrhea and the spiritual cessation of menstruation are presented.

The Religious Inversion of Amenorrhea

Chinese medical practitioners distinguish between two fundamental forms of secondary amenorrhea: the blockage, and the drying up of menstrual blood. Medical practitioners considered secondary amenorrhea, specifically the blockage of menstruation, a life-threatening disease, and its pathological character was and still is countered by various

means (Bray, 1995; Furth, 1986). More precisely, traditional Chinese medicine differentiates between seven types of amenorrhea: the stagnation of blood caused by a cold pathogen (see also Ngin, 1985: 37); blood deficiency due to repressed emotions; the drying up of menstrual blood due to exhaustion; chronic coughing or consumption; irregular menstruation due to menopause; primary amenorrhea in girls; and amenorrhea of nuns, widows and unmarried women due to frustrated sexuality (Bray, 1995: 242-243).

According to Dikötter (1995: 67), the suppression of sexual desire was believed to bring about not only amenorrhea, but also spermatorrhea.[6] Indeed, Chinese medicine believed in the absolute need of (hetero-) sexual intercourse for general health. Of especial interest is how medical practitioners recognized nuns to be liable to suffer from secondary amenorrhea so much so that they were seen as a specific category, like other sexually inactive women. Chinese doctors thus linked *their* amenorrhea to questions of sexuality and fertility, considering it a sign of sexual abstinence, *and* as a sign of sexual frustration. Today, as in the past, many interlocutors still connect secondary amenorrhea with the clergy:

> Q: "Have you heard about the spiritual cessation of menstruation?"
> Ms Chen: "Yes, I've heard many people talking about it, but I haven't met anybody who experienced it. Neither have I. But it's not an issue for me anymore as I have had hysterectomy. Yet I think that menstruation is actually good for us."
> Q: "Who told you about it?"
> Ms Chen: "I cannot remember. It's something that exists in Chinese Buddhism. I haven't heard anybody mentioning it in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. I have no idea why menstruation should stop. I just remember that I was told that *bhiksunīs* experience this with increased practice. Have you met someone who has it?"[7]

This brief conversation firstly illustrates spiritual amenorrhea as explicitly associated with Chinese, or Taiwanese Buddhism. Moreover, this contemporary Buddhist connected

[6] The medical writer Shen Jinba (18th century) wrote: "the menses become deregulated if the female has no intercourse with a male for ten years. He went on to emphasize how nuns and widows suffered amenorrhea when their "urge" was not satisfied" (Dikötter, 1995: 67). Note, however, that one scholar (Clintock) is believed to have proven that, "women without regular contact (sexual or not) with men tend to menstruate less frequently" (Lamp, 1988: 226).

[7] Conversation, Taoyuan City, 23.02.2003.

spiritual amenorrhea with the clergy. In concordance with Chinese medicine, Ms Chen considered menstruation itself a healthy event.

Daoist practitioners of Internal Alchemy, *Neidan* 內丹, advanced a distinctively different interpretation of amenorrhea, where an initial aim was to "behead the red dragon" *zhan chilong* 斬赤龍, an epithet for the cessation of menstruation.[8] Specific meditation practices were devised to put an end to menstruation, parallel to the control of semen, and thereby transform it into an immortality elixir. Menstrual blood was considered a resource that was to be transformed, a resource that gave women an advantage in their spiritual cultivation as men had to produce a "mysterious pearl" first, whereas the female body naturally contained it. The goal of Internal Alchemy was to create a double of oneself, the *Yinshen* 陰身 (*Yin* body), which was then – through contemplation – transformed into a pure light body, the *Yangshen* 陽身 (*Yang* body). In short, adepts aspired to create a duplicate of themselves, an immortal body, *Yangshen*, which could leave its original abode for higher realms, or rebirth.

Internal Alchemy thus considered menstrual blood the energetic foundation of women and seminal essence that of men. Both were transmuted into *qi* during the first stage of practice. As Chinese medicine held *qi* to be simultaneously lost when blood, or semen flow out, various practices were prescribed to reduce their outflow until these substances were completely transformed and reached the brain as *qi*. Seated in meditation posture, the female adept nourished her menstrual blood with the secretion of her breasts, stimulated through massage in circular movements while visualizing the desired result. She then proceeded to stop all discursive thoughts. Because the female body was deemed to

[8] I use 'past tense' here, as I do not know whether these practices are currently carried out (I have evidence for the massage-technique, but not the rest). Furth (1999: 221) posits Internal Alchemy to have been an esoteric practice, which might still be the case. For a detailed discussion see Despeux, 1990; Robinet, 1993; Schipper, 1993; Wile, 1992; Zhang Xün, 1997.

essentially possess the "mysterious pearl", the combination of the transformed menstrual blood and breast secretion required to form a mental duplicate of her body, female practitioners merely needed to enhance this substance. Male adepts, by contrast, had to produce it first through the process of circulation. Hence, female practitioners created the "mysterious pearl" through metamorphosis on account of their gynocentric creative potential, while male adepts needed to imitate this process first through the practice of creation and generation.

During the second stage, an imagined embryo was cultivated through an imagined temporal inner fire for the duration of ten lunar months (a practice that sounds strikingly similar to inner heat practice in Vajrayāna Buddhism). This process was also considered as much easier to accomplish for female practitioners because of their natural generative potential. Even though both sexes followed the same practices, men had to "conceal their *qi*" for three years, whereas women needed less than one year to engender the embryo. At this stage, *qi* reached every part of the body in a moving fashion, causing the forgetting of all exterior phenomena, and generated 'embryonic breathing' which induced 'supreme bliss' in the practitioner.

The third and last stage of this practice comprised the recitation of the mantra of *Avalokiteśvara* '*Om ma ni pad me hum*'[9] to reunify the five different *qi*, an idea that is believed to be linked to five-phase cosmology, but that may equally be related to *Anuttarayoga* practices, and concepts of the five Buddha families.[10] Then, adepts entered a stage of meditative absorption for ten days at most, a state that was said to resemble death, during which they were supervised. The *Yangshen* was then moved from the solar plexus to the crown of the head. When the *Yangshen* was said to be ready to leave the body, the top of the

[9] Literally: "Om Jewel Lotus Hum".
[10] For Five Phases cosmology, see Major 1993 and related papers.

head appeared to explode and open. Colored *qi* would float about and the adept perceived light successively in five different colors, which s/he would attempt to unify, causing thunder to roll and the celestial gate to open. Thereupon, the *Yangshen* was said to leave the body through the crown, merging with the 'One', implying the transcendence of all dualities. The practitioner now had to meditate in front of a wall for another nine years, during which the self was substituted by the infinite/void. However, before rising to heaven, adepts were required to perform virtuous deeds (Despeux, 1990: 238-286).[11]

This short overview of Internal Alchemy shows that although women had a better starting point in their spiritual cultivation, they were doctrinally required to stop menstruating at a certain point in their religious career. Spiritual amenorrhea indicated the first stage of their religious achievement. They had to transform a *Yin* substance, menstrual blood, which was considered a spiritual resource, but also deemed impure, into a more precious *Yang* substance, *qi* (Despeux, 1990: 284, 287).[12] Yet, male adepts were required to become internally female to create an embryo. Their sexual organs were said to retract inwards while women's breasts shrank. Thus, both women *and* men became de-sexed, or biologically androgynous through their spiritual cultivation. Women stopped menstruation and men ejaculation and thereby enhanced their vitality to the point of immortality. And so, adepts aspired to the dissolution of sex and gender as a means to attain immortality.[13] In general, though, these practices illustrate how female sexuality and vitality were associated with menstruation and its absence. The transcending of biological gender distinction was

[11] See Despeux, 1990 for a comprehensive study of these practices. For an English translation of similar practices, see Wiles, 1992.

[12] Similarly to Despeux, Furth maintains the obsession of Internal Alchemy with immortality to imply that practitioners aimed at "overcoming something in the self that was both unclean and weak". She further posits these practices to symbolize "socially transgressive rejection of both sex and procreation, and an ascetic denial of the body rather than transcendence through it" (Furth, 1999: 283). We clearly require more empirical data to verify this hypothesis.

[13] However, Schipper (1993: 129) believes only pregnant female bodies to have been considered complete because of their generative potential.

achieved through the transformation of uterine liquids and the physical body.

Although these specific practices are claimed to be esoteric and not widely known, popular discourse and medical thinking nonetheless echo such views. Moskowitz (2001: 136-137) states that the fear of losing vitality through ejaculation is still prevalent in Taiwan today. Thus even though Internal Alchemy practices have been esoteric, popular lore and bedtime manuals certainly bear their influence (Van Gulik, 1961).

Wile (1992: 193) speculates that these practices were devised in Buddhist convents. However, to date no evidence warrants his hypothesis. Although meditating in front of a wall is a Chan Buddhist meditation practice, and much of the vocabulary clearly draws on Vajrayāna Buddhism, such as the dissolution process, the Internal Alchemy practices quoted above stem from a much later date than the *Tantras* and Chan practices. While some Internal Alchemy practices hark back to the twelfth century, the fact that these specific female practices were only devised during the seventeenth century (Furth, 1999: 219) calls Wile's hypothesis into question. Because most of the imagery and meditation techniques appear Daoist, it is more likely that Daoist adepts conflated indigenous Chinese with Vajrayāna and Chan Buddhist concepts, a hypothesis corroborated by Robinet (1997: 217).

In the study of Chinese religions, it is common knowledge that the interaction of Buddhism and Daoism was thorough and long-standing. So was the effort on both sides to assert the superiority of one over the other. Borrowing between traditions nevertheless occurred in both directions. So, the belief in the spiritual cessation of menstruation among Buddhists quite possibly originated in Daoist circles, since no Buddhist sūtra appears to discuss comparable concepts. The only available Buddhist quotation with regard to the spiritual cessation of sexual processes appears in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya*: "if one controls the sexual power or organ, the secondary characteristics, particularly the genitalia, would cease to function" (Paul, 1985: 172).

Just as pregnancy entails amenorrhea, so the second stage of Internal Alchemy, the generation of an imagined embryo, entailed spiritual amenorrhea. Hence in Internal Alchemy, the achievement of spiritual amenorrhea still signified pregnancy, albeit imagined, thus Daoist spiritual amenorrhea mirrored general assumptions about female reproduction. Consequently, the mental and the physical, the real and the imagined, or religious and secular merged in Daoist amenorrhea. Internal Alchemy practices thus demonstrate how amenorrhea and female generative potential were adopted by religious beliefs. The spiritual amenorrhea of Internal Alchemy adepts paralleled the successful conception in the secular realm. But its aim, immortality, differed. However, the imaginary devices used to induce spiritual amenorrhea drew on general assumptions of female embodiment. Even so, the imagined embryo was produced without the aid of male sperm, and its production was also the aim of male adepts. So these practices, albeit reflecting biological reproductive theories, did invert them significantly. In brief, secondary amenorrhea was the result of spiritual pregnancy, and the retraction of semen and male sexual organs was the parallel to the shrinking of breasts and the drying up of uterine blood.

Not only menstruation, but also its absence are central to conceptions of fertility, and fertility is – especially in China – intimately, even inherently entwined with sexuality. Perhaps for this reason, mainstream Taiwanese discourse today still deems secondary amenorrhea so disquieting. Chinese medicine correlated female fertility with sexual desire so thoroughly that "the woman's sexual body was never separated from the gestational body" (Furth, 1999: 91).

Buddhists aim to renounce fertility– and especially as monastics, sexuality. One of the greatest hindrances to spiritual perfection is desire, one of the three root defilements

binding humans to cyclic existence, samsāra:[14] Sūtras represent sexuality as the quintessence of desire. Hence in order to attain liberation, desire has to be vanquished, thus menstruation – as a sign for sexuality and desire – should equally cease. This conflation of desire and menstruation has survived in other Buddhist cultures until the present, such as Sri Lanka (MacCormack, 1981: 4; McGilvray, 1981: 31). Furthermore, Paul (1979: 186-187) and Levering (2000: 146-147) both refer to the Indian Buddhist conception of female power as connected to sexual desire: Female sexual desire had to be eradicated for the attainment of a male body and the subsequent eradication of male desire. Only then could Buddhahood be reached.

Many interlocutors, in particular Abbess B. and her master, attributed the spiritual cessation of menstruation to the elimination of desire. Similarly, during teachings on sūtras Ms Li was taught (by a male master) that menstruation ceases with the attainment of the first stage of stream-enterer[15], where the person is no longer subject to carnal desire the way ordinary humans are (Collins, 1997: 190; Goldman, 2001: 101; Reyl, 1984: 56).[16] Hence in stark contrast to the Daoist attainment of immortality, for which the transformation of menstruation was a prerequisite, and where the concomitant appraisal of female generative potential was positive, a presumably rather gloomy view – the connection of sexuality, desire and menstrual blood – inspires, or sanctions, female Buddhist practitioners to stop menstruating.

This is diametrically opposed to general interpretations of secondary amenorrhea. Whereas traditional Chinese medicine maintains that nuns (spiritual practitioners) *suffer* from amenorrhea due to *sexual frustration*, or *unfulfilled desire* (Dikötter, 1995: 67; Furth, 1999: 171),

[14] The following scholars refer to this issue: Faure, 1998: 15; Reyl, 1984: 16-17; Barnes, 1987: 111; Spiro, 1993: 317-318. Levering (1989: 77) points out that the recitation of the *Śūrangama* mantra in the morning in Chinese monasteries (in Taiwan) is believed to specifically decrease sexual desire.

[15] For a discussion of this stage, refer to Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 570, 631, 1683, 1713, 2790, 2972, 2997, 5128, 5360.

[16] Informal conversation, Taipei city, 23.11.2001.

Buddhists in Taiwan claim that such practitioners experience spiritual amenorrhea because they have *extinguished sexual desire.* Both views are consistent in their understanding of secondary amenorrhea in the light of sexual desire, but their interpretations differ in accordance with their respective worldviews. And so, while the majority of Taiwanese almost certainly espouse medical interpretations of amenorrhea (Furth and Chen, 1992), one tradition within Chinese culture, Daoism, promotes the transformation of menstruation, while (popular) Buddhist discourse implicitly sanctions the cessation of menstruation. The interpretation of amenorrhea by Buddhists is therefore an inversion of the commonly accepted negative view. For religious practitioners, Buddhist and Daoist alike, it is a sign of spiritual progress, not medical pathology.

Table 2: Different interpretations of menstruation and its cessation

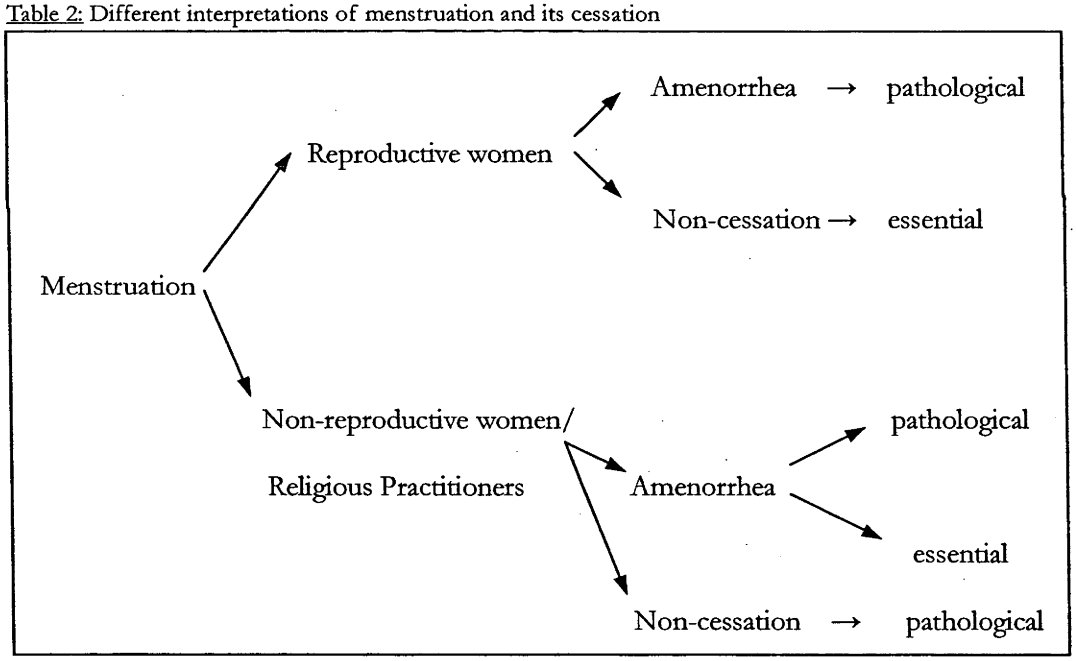

Table two illustrates amenorrhea in reproductive women to be commonly interpreted as pathology. Because Taiwanese society largely celebrates reproductive women who procreate, menstruation, as an indication of a healthy monthly cycle (and thus fertility) is essential. Among religious practitioners, in contrast, amenorrhea is an important attribute of

spiritual practice – hence the continuance of menstruation is rather an indicator of mediocrity in spiritual practice. Thus, the Buddhist appraisal of the cessation of menstruation, and the Daoist transformation of menstrual blood both invert the normative assessment of amenorrhea.

This discussion illustrates the interpretation of secondary amenorrhea as multifaceted and multi-vocal, differing not only within Taiwanese culture; that is, between different interests, such as reproduction vis-à-vis childlessness, but also in the assessment of ordinary women *versus* religious practitioners, and between adherents of different religions. This data thus establishes the coexistence of opposing discourses on secondary amenorrhea.

Group Affiliation

Even though Taiwanese Buddhists have the option to consider the cessation of menstruation as testifying to women's spiritual potential, they may not do so. Because a number of discourses on amenorrhea coexist, they can draw on different interpretations for the same phenomenon depending on the context, and the speaker's standpoint.

The Buddhist practitioner Ms Hui, about forty years old in 1999, declared in a very secretive manner to have stopped menstruating, and claimed this as testimony to her spiritual power (Yeshe, 2002a). Ms Hui also avowed that her consciousness sometimes leaves her body. When Mr Da referred to a nun who he believed to have experienced the cessation of menstruation, I mentioned that Ms Hui had said she had stopped menstruating – she was an acquaintance of Mr Da. He replied, "No, *her* case is different. That's not the spiritual cessation of menstruation. She has pathological amenorrhea, because her *qi* is not balanced." His strong aversion to Ms Hui was commonly known. However, several weeks after she had made the statement, I saw a sanitary napkin fall out of her handbag. Embarrassed, she said, "Sometimes, it comes back."

This example testifies to the hypothesis that individuals interpret amenorrhea differently in different individuals and contexts. Mr Da was aware of the Chinese medical explanation of secondary amenorrhea as the result of the imbalance of *Yin* and *Yang*, an explanation Dr Shu also invoked. Hence, Mr Da knew of different causes for the same phenomenon, and insisted that in the case of the nun, a professional religious practitioner, the cessation of menstruation could only have been of a spiritual nature, while in the case of his perceived foe, Ms Hui, he interpreted amenorrhea as pathological. But the case Ms Hui and her dropped napkin also suggests that some women simulate the desired spiritual cessation of menstruation – perhaps to prove their religious, or spiritual attainments.

A similar scenario occurred in 2001. When I first discussed the cessation of menstruation with Ms Gao, she expressly believed amenorrhea to be the product of malnutrition. Because the *Vinaya* prescribes very stringent rules regarding food, nuns, she reasoned, if they adhere strictly to the *Vinaya*, they stop menstruating. She recounted her experiences in a strict monastic setting, where she lived for several years as a lay practitioner. As a result of the inadequate food supply, her body weakened, and after she left the monastery, she ate meat again to restore her health.[17]

Several months after this conversation, she revealed how once, her menstruation stopped for a short time, shortly after she had left the monastery. Her uterus then produced a golden-colored liquid (instead of menstrual blood), and a very comfortable feeling pervaded her body, but when her friend talked her into buying sensual underwear, she menstruated again.[18] She believes that she had overcome male/female dualism, yet because

[17] Conversation, Taipei, November 2001.

[18] Compare the exposition of this informant with the following story: Lupton (1993: 202-203) cites Eugenie Lemoine-Luccione's *A Fable of Blood*, in which a patient "whose two years of amenorrhea ended when she put on lipstick, as a physician had advised, and her periods came back."

she grasped at her femininity, her menstruation returned.[19] In her own case, she did *not* link her amenorrhea to a lack of nutrients despite the fact that, according to her own testament several months earlier, she suffered from malnutrition serious enough for her to abandon vegetarianism.[20] Hence she distinguished between spiritual and corporeal causes of amenorrhea. Interestingly, the biological process she describes – her uterine fluid changing into a golden color – appears in Daoist meditation manuals (Furth, 1999: 209, 219; Wile, 1992). She was the only interlocutor who described this matter in such detail. In a way similar to Ms Hui, she related her experience in a very secretive manner when we discussed meditative absorption. During the conversation, she used her amenorrhea to attest to her superior religious attainments.[21]

In both examples, the women who claimed to have experienced spiritual amenorrhea saw their experiences as an indication of their own spiritual potential. Ms Gao, however, only linked her own amenorrhea to spiritual practice while she insisted that the amenorrhea of nuns routinely occurs due to external factors, pre-eminently malnutrition. On the contrary, Dr Shu, Mr Da, Ms Chen and Ms Sun linked spiritual amenorrhea to the clergy. In the same way as Mr Da disliked Ms Hui, Ms Gao had a strong aversion toward Taiwanese nuns, which came to light in our numerous conversations regarding Taiwanese Buddhism. In both cases, the explication of spiritual amenorrhea was intimately entwined with personal predilection, and spiritual preference.

In concurrence with the above observation, Shi De, a practitioner of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism believed it impossible to find a practitioner of Taiwanese Buddhism who has experienced the spiritual cessation of menstruation. She pointed out that firstly, not even the famous Ven. Cheng-yen has spiritual amenorrhea, and secondly, her aunt stopped

[19] I discuss this example elsewhere in the context of desire and power (Yeshe, 2003b).
[20] Many Taiwanese Buddhists consider a vegetarian diet an essential attribute of a Buddhist way of life.
[21] Conversation, Taipei, June 2002.

menstruating at the age of thirty-six without having been a Buddhist. If practitioners of Taiwanese Buddhism experience the cessation of menstruation, Shi De posited, it must either be due to premature menopause, or pathological factors. One can only find women practitioners with the spiritual cessation of menstruation at a high level of realization, such as the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition, reasoning that Vajrayāna Buddhism works with the body, that is, through visualizations of charkas and veins of the subtle body, which can cause the physical body to change and thus enable women to stop menstruating.[22] Similar to other interlocutors, Shi De judged only women who follow her preferred practice, namely Vajrayāna Buddhism, to be able to experience the true spiritual cessation of menstruation.[23] In this way, several interlocutors used the phenomenon of spiritual amenorrhea to reinforce convictions of personal superiority, or the superiority of their own spiritual path.

Another interlocutor showed a similar tendency. In the beginning, Dr Shu stated that secondary amenorrhea can be a sign of formidable spiritual attainments, akin to that displayed by walking through walls – in short, a *siddhi.* But at a later point during the interview, when asked about comparable ways in which men could prove their spiritual attainment, he changed his mind. He then argued, "actually, stopping menstruation is only the beginning of spiritual cultivation." Similar to other interlocutors, he considered secondary amenorrhea a testimony to the spiritual attainment among individuals in their group. Dr Shu only deemed it an extraordinary sign when not compared to *his* group, the generic and normative male. One could posit that because of his inability to provide a parallel phenomenon in men, he said so. This example also elucidates that spiritual amenorrhea may be considered to undermine male authority in that men simply cannot prove the absence of their fertility in a comparable way, and thus this specific female

[22] In *Annutara Yoga* practices, the highest yoga, practitioners visualize themselves not solely in the form of a meditational *yidam*, but also visualize charkas which pervade the (subtle) body.
[23] Conversation, Taipei, 06.09.2002. See Thurman (1988: 124) for details regarding the "illusory body".

attainment is then denigrated to an inferior position.

Only Abbess B., abbess of a number of temples as well as sponsor of several Vajrayāna retreat facilities and monasteries, a practitioner of both Chinese and Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, maintained *samadhi* (meditative absorption) as well as *Tummo* (inner heat practices) to induce the spiritual cessation of menstruation. Generally though, all interlocutors knew that different factors can give rise to amenorrhea. Yet, almost all interlocutors deemed only those women belonging either to *their* circle of practice, or their friends as having experienced the 'true' spiritual cessation of menstruation.

Desire, Purity and Control

Q: "Have you heard about the spiritual cessation of menstruation?"
Ms Sun: "Yes. It really exists."
Q: "How does it come about?"
Ms Sun: "When female practitioners are really dedicated and focused on their practice. They have to be really concentrated and not distracted, you know, vis-à-vis exterior things. Then the monthlies become gradually less until they eventually disappear. It's really true."
Q: "Who experiences this?"
Ms Sun: "By the state of Arhatship, menstruation ceases. Because there are no more defilements. At that point, there is no menstruation. Nothing. Arhats don't have (sexual) desire. But if at that stage, you eat onions and garlic again, it (menstruation) comes back."
Q: "So, is it mental afflictions *or* desire that causes menstruation?"
No answer, only a broad smile.
Q: "Is it a phenomenon that only exists in Chinese Buddhism alone, or does it also appear in Tibetan Buddhism?"
Ms Sun: "It's Chinese."
Q: "How did you find out about this?"
Ms Sun: "A Master in Kaohsiung told us when lecturing on sūtras."
Q: "Was s/he male or female?"
Ms Sun: "It really exists."
Q: "Was s/he male or female?"
Ms Sun: "Really, it truly exists."
Q: "Was s/he male or female?"
No answer, slightly angry facial expression.[24]

[24] Conversation, Taoyuan City, 25.02.2003.

Ms Sun, like Ms Li, learned about the spiritual cessation from a master in Kaohsiung during a lecture on sūtras. Both connected this phenomenon with Arhatship, and the concomitant cessation of desire. It was impossible to reconfirm whether both had learned about this phenomenon from the same master, but it is worth noting that Mr Da, Prof. De, and Ms Hui also lived in Kaohsiung when we first discussed this matter in 1999. Likewise, Abbess B's main temple is located in Southern Taiwan, and one questionnaire respondent listed one abbess in Kaohsiung county as a spiritual non-menstruator.[25] Moreover, a Western observer noted this belief at another large temple in Kaohsiung county. There is thus some room for the speculation that the *contemporary* belief in the spiritual cessation of menstruation is propagated in this specific region. Still, neither Ms Gao and Shi De, nor Ms Cheng and her sister come from Kaohsiung, nor did the majority of respondents to the questionnaire. Further, when I asked several nuns who were from Kaohsiung county during the ordination period about this belief, they had never heard of it. They were comparatively young in comparison with the above interlocutors. Some categorically refused to comment.

The interview with Ms Sun testifies to a number of arguments. She stated *expressis verbis* that the spiritual cessation of menstruation *only* exists in Chinese Buddhism, and was very adamant that it *does* exist, but refused to answer my question about the sex of the promulgator of this view. Furthermore, Ms Sun linked menstruation with questions of control of desire in the same way most other interlocutors did. With Arhatship, which all interlocutors considered a high stage of spiritual cultivation, desire is vanquished, *ergo* menstruation stops. However, if one eats onions or garlic, the monthly bleeding returns.

This statement calls for commentary. Many interlocutors and friends believed garlic and onions to arouse sexual desire, hence Buddhists – monks and nuns in particular – have to abstain from these substances. This abstinence is promulgated in various indigenous

[25] I tried to arrange an interview in 2003 with this particular abbess, which was flatly refused.

Chinese as well as Indian sūtras, Tibetan Buddhism, it constitutes one of the rules for monastics, and, as discussed in Chapter Three, reflects earlier rules of the "Vegetarian religion" (Jones, 1999: 15).[26] Because garlic and onions arouse desire, they induce menstruation. Most interlocutors agreed that spiritual amenorrhea requires freedom from mental afflictions, a mind unperturbed by the waves of life and death, free of desire. However, desire is not conquered by the mind alone. It requires the abstinence from certain foodstuffs, too. This illustrates the conception of an intricate relationship between the body and mind – considered mutually dependent, as already discussed in Chapter Two. Because the body is held to be influenced by the mind and *vice versa,* mental purity is reflected in physicality and physical outflows can be held to signify mental impurity.

> Another such moment of truth is menstruation. Because its outflow threatens the self-enclosure of the body, menstruation becomes a convenient emblem of defilement [...]. Thus, despite the Buddhist advocacy of non-duality, it seems practically impossible for [women] to transcend sexual difference (Faure, 1998: 57).

Unless they stop menstruating. My data shows that menstruation is not merely an emblem for defilement. It signifies sexuality and desire in particular. As such, the absence of menstruation due to spiritual factors evidences the vanquishing of desire in the same way as the end of the production of semen. As Dr Shu pointed out – thought precedes action, and so a seminal eruption bespeaks of "wrong thoughts", that is, sexual desire.[27] Correspondingly, ovulation, hence menstrual blood indicates similar wrong thoughts. Similar to Chinese medicine and Internal Alchemy (Furth, 1999: 308), Dr Shu juxtaposed menstrual blood and seminal essence. In this way, the man who loses semen and the

[26] According to the Foguang Dictionary (2001: 1099), several passages in different sūtras refer to the abstinence from "five food-stuffs", which appear to be different substances in different contexts. Furthermore, the Buddha is said to have prohibited monks to eat garlic for reasons of bad smell, so they were confined to their room if they had eaten garlic (as medicine) in the case of a sickness. As for nuns, the Buddha apparently prohibited nuns to eat garlic because a landlord allowed a number of nuns to harvest garlic for their own use. In his absence, however, each collected additional garlic for their friends with the result that the owner returned and found his field empty, whereupon he complained to the Buddha, who then decreed nuns to refrain from eating garlic. In Tibetan Buddhism, however, garlic and onions are two of the five 'black foods' (meat, radish, eggs), which meditators should abstain from in certain contexts.

[27] Wet dreams are also considered a sign of lingering sexual desire (Collins, 1997: 190).

menstruating woman are both stigmatized as desirous. Nevertheless, one respondent to the questionnaire explained this very concept (without being prompted) as being of Daoist origins, and Dr Shu clearly had filiations with a group that definitely did not comply with what the BAROC would consider "Buddhist". (The male teacher of Mr Da, who first referred to the spiritual cessation of menstruation in 1999, had apparently similar connections prior to his conversion to Buddhism.)

The transformation of male sexuality is evidenced in the *Vinaya*, which stipulates ejaculation as prohibited for monks. Dr Shu emphatically considered this rule particularly difficult to keep.[28] Taiwanese monks and nuns therefore renounce their sexual potential, symbolized in their procreative effluviae. In Chinese apocryphal sūtras and Internal Alchemy practices, menstrual blood is the very stuff which creates the (spiritual) embryo, a belief that reflects the conflation of sexuality and fertility (Furth, 1986; 1999).[29] Accordingly, the cessation of menstrual blood and semen constitute two gendered dimensions of the same process. But whereas male renunciants supposedly control their semen, female renunciants have to live with menstruation until menopause sets in. Thus monks can (presumably) control their sexual drives, while nuns cannot graphically restrain their sexual urges in the same way since they are less likely to be able to control their menstrual outflow, unless they are outstanding practitioners, sick or menopausal.[30]

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[28] One exposition of the rule in the *Vinaya*, which requires monks to refrain from ejaculation, reflects the difficulty of controlling male sexuality. The *Vinaya* stipulates that ejaculation during sleep is not a transgression (Parrinder, 1991: 61). Similarly, male projections of the threatening female in Buddhist literature depict monks as unable to control their sexual drive in entirety. (This discussion is partly inspired by Barnes, 1987: 113.)

[29] Furth's studies (1986; 1999) show how throughout Chinese history, sexuality and fertility were consistently conflated. In this respect, menstrual blood and semen were considered parallel (rather than vaginal fluids and seminal essence) (Furth, 1999: 77). See the *Sūtra on the Difficulty of Repaying the Kindness of One's Parents.*

[30] Not only popular Buddhist discourse sees menstruation in the context of a perceived loss of control. Consider *The Curse*, where the extraction method for menstrual blood is explicitly linked to women's control over their bodies (Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1988: 255). Martin provides another example from the Western sphere. She surmises that women are considered "out of control" when they menstruate (Martin, 1992: 47), and refers to an informant who claims to be a *controlled* menstruator (Martin, 1992: 87). Furthermore, Hauser-Schäublin (1993: 100) sees menstruation as the "power of the uncontrollable".

Hence issues of purity are intimately entwined with gendered differences as rooted in corporeal control – note that keeping the precepts in accordance with the *Vinaya* requires self-control. Correspondingly, in Chinese culture, "the lack of self control was a mark of inferior class and gender [...] peasants were enviably fecund because of the strength of their desire" (Bray, 1997: 365; see also Moskowitz, 2001: 135). And so, Buddhist associations of desire and fertility – and their control – entered a lasting marriage with Chinese conceptions of fertility and sexuality.

Of the male Buddhist population, monks and awakened ones recognizably prove their control of sexuality, as the chastity of the *Vinaya* does not apply to householders,[31] while any female practitioner (householder or renunciant) may experience amenorrhea. Even though this provides female practitioners with a rather visible means of establishing their control over sexuality, the downside of this rhetoric is that very few women are actually graced with the spiritual cessation of menstruation. All women ultimately reach menopause. Nevertheless, no interlocutor considered menopause *per se* a sign of spiritual power. Even so, while there is little public physical indication of a male householder's control of sexual desire, a woman can prove more readily the absence of uterine discharges, and thereby, against all odds, prove her spiritual attainment.

A paradox indeed: women cannot control their physical effluviae, but they can cease to menstruate and thereby provide evidence of their spiritual attainment; men can supposedly control their semen, but cannot prove the absence of sexual fluids as easily as women. Still, that male sexuality is believed to be more controllable renders the position of women more vulnerable. While semen, an explicit sign of sex, signals the failure of renunciation,

[31] However, as discussed in Chapter Two, householders' sexuality, of both men and women, is controlled by injunctions of wrong person (incest, adultery), time (pregnancy, fasting, sickness), and place (temple, in front of a crowd) and orifice. Yet lay practitioners may receive the vow of chastity for 24 hours or longer periods of time.

menstrual blood is but an implicit symbol of a woman's procreative potential. Women's sexual desires are, by and large, well hidden, obscure to the outsider, but male desire is rather noticeable.[32] Perhaps because of the difficulty of establishing female sexual desire, women were charged as lascivious. And so, Chinese medical theory accused celibate women as being plagued by sexual dreams (Furth, 1986: 61). This reveals how celibate women were judged incapable of controlling their desires, which (because invisible, they could not be verified as conscious) subconsciously haunt them (in dreams). It would seem that because women's desires could not be detected without difficulty, popular discourse charged them with sexual dreams. This was also revealed in public performances, parodies in fact, which depicted nuns as struggling with sexual desire (Goldman, 2001). In spite of that, no female interlocutor *ever* referred to women's difficulties in keeping chastity while Dr Shu repeatedly raised this issue vis-à-vis men. So did Shi Xin, two abbesses and Shi Yikong (2002).

This discussion may elucidate one of the driving forces behind the Chinese Buddhist aversion to menstruation. Perhaps, uterine blood was linked to female sexuality due to the conflation of female sexuality and fertility, and because as part of the childbearing process, it is connected to the cycle of life and death and questions of power (that may also be of spiritual nature). However, uterine blood was probably also the public sign of female sexuality due to the relative invisibility, or obscurity of female sexual desire.

This relation between sexuality, desire and secondary amenorrhea is further intimately entwined with questions of purity. Buddhism connects the renunciation of sexual desires with a quest for purity. A good practitioner is supposed to be closer to awakening than the average adherent. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Buddha was believed to have been able to control his bodily functions, including sexual and reproductive ones. Thus in ceasing to

[32] Paul (1985: xxiv) argues that the view of the feminine as "mysterious, sensual, destructive, elusive and closer to nature" resulted in the belief that "associations with this nether-world may be polluting and deadly for the male".

menstruate and ejaculate, practitioners prove their ability to control their bodies.

In short, the very existence of menstruation and semen are signs of (mental) impurity and thus being bound to samsāra.[33] Their absence in reproductive men and women symbolizes the approaching of nirvāna. In this way, the extinguishing of uterine blood or semen are considered as signs of progress in spiritual practice. Hence, although the quest for the cessation of menstruation might be a product of a general aversion to uterine blood (be that by men or women themselves), it is informed by certain Buddhist convictions. Yet the spiritual cessation of menstruation nevertheless mirrors women's spiritual attainments.

The (Buddhist) Inducement of Secondary Amenorrhea?

Since the cessation of menstruation is taken to symbolize the approaching of nirvāna, it signifies the attainment of a high level of spiritual cultivation. Even those interlocutors who had not heard about this phenomenon before, when I asked them to reflect on it, thought the stage of spiritual insight required for the spiritual cessation of menstruation to be exalted. Thus the (false) claim of some women to have stopped menstruating through spiritual practice could be considered rather self-aggrandizing. But it does explain why women aspire to religiously sanctioned amenorrhea. As stated above, Ms Li maintained to have been told that women stop menstruating the moment they reach the stage of a "stream-enterer". Ms Su and several respondents to the questionnaire listed the level of Arhatship as entailing the cessation of menstruation. Similarly, Dr Shu insinuated that when women stop menstruating, they are able to perform various supernatural and mystic feats. Hence not surprisingly, only a few women are actually considered as "enjoying" spiritual amenorrhea, whereas the majority of cases are rather considered as "suffering" from

[33] Paul (1985: 4-6) alludes to the tendency to equate women with samsāra, a phenomenon also discussed by Barnes (1987: 110) and Gross (1993: 48): "A woman was the veritable image of becoming, and of all the forces of blind growth and productivity which Buddhists knew as samsāra." Nevertheless, she believes that this equation was "never full blown"

pathological amenorrhea. In his career as a medical practitioner, Dr Shu emphasized, he had *only* encountered women with menstrual problems and pathological amenorrhea, but never a woman with spiritual amenorrhea. But then, it is unlikely that such a woman would seek a doctor's advice.

Only very few women are believed to be spiritual non-menstruators, for only a minority is deemed capable of attaining such advanced spiritual accomplishments.[34]

> Dr Shu: "... as nuns, women still have the inconvenience of menstruation. If one would stop menstruation once one is ordained, then *Amitabha*, all those women hoping to be male (could) all become ordained."
> Abbess B.: "Or in the context of *Tummo*, the menstruation follows the inner fire, like Dr Shu just now described. Not every nun experiences this, she still has to practice *Tummo*..."[35]

Abbess B. reacted promptly to Dr Shu's insinuation, namely that it would be nice if nuns could easily experience the cessation of menstruation. She stressed this phenomenon as not easily accomplished. Dr Shu unmistakably connected the cessation of menstruation with masculinization: "then all those women hoping to be male." He therefore considered the ceasing of the female biological cycle as testament to women's transformation into men.

Here, and during a private conversation, Abbess B. attributed the spiritual cessation of menstruation to the Vajrayāna practice *Tummo*, but when recounting her master's point of view, she supposed that if one follows a way of life in the spirit of the Dharma and the vows, menstruation ceases naturally. Another time, she listed possible causes for the spiritual cessation of menstruation, stating that the *Fanwangjing*, possibly an indigenous Chinese sūtra, contains a section pertaining to this issue. Still, when asked for details, she refused further comment. According to Abbess B., menstruation ceases when the state of *samadhi* (single-pointed concentration/禪定) is reached. But additional factors are required

[34] Note, though, that the same may apply to men, that is, only few practitioners are considered as having reached advanced meditative stages.
[35] Interview, 26.12.2002.

to enable spiritual amenorrhea: the absence of males. For this reason, she deduced that it is wrong for monastics to live in mixed temples, and that because it is almost impossible to avoid males these days, nuns rarely stop menstruating due to spiritual factors.[36] During the recorded interview, on the other hand, she stated:

> Abbess B.: "During a lecture on the *Lengyan Sūtra*, [my master] raised the point that Buddhism differentiates between the laity and the clergy. As a layperson, you can marry [...] but as ordained sangha, you have to practice purely, neither speak nor have desire. Hence we did not receive full ordination due to trivial problems. If our mind *has* already entered the Dharma, very clearly, one is already truly leading the Dharma gate, has taken refuge in the Buddha, and on a daily basis works and rests [in accordance with] the *Vinaya* and stabilizes wisdom, then, my teacher said, in some cases, menstruation stops earlier. She thought that it is very good like this as one does not need to busy oneself [with menstruation] once a month. Some still menstruate at the age of fifty, that's very painful. Hence my master thought that... once we follow the Buddha's guidance after ordination, and practice in a way that follows the precepts, then our life becomes a Dharmic [way of] life. Of course, women have female biology and biological organs, so menstruation still recurs, but she didn't know why. She herself didn't worry about this problem, hence at the age of thirty-five, her menstruation had completely cleared away. In accordance with the *Lengyan Sūtra*, she said that if *bhikṣunīs* can focus on the Buddhist way of life, then every person should be able to stop menstruation.... She meant that because she had no desirous thoughts, ... she didn't talk about medical biological reasons."
> Q: "So was it a matter of desire?"
> A: "That is probably what she meant."[37]

Abbess B. assessed the spiritual cessation of menstruation differently at different times: once she advanced the viewpoint of her teacher, at another time she was in the presence of Dr Shu, and another time in the presence of a tape recorder. Like most interlocutors, her master considered the vanquishing of desire as the cause of the cessation of menstruation. According to her (master), the cessation of menstruation is a possibility for every dedicated

[36] Interview, 26.12.2002.

[37] Interview, 16.01.2003.
As in so many instances in this thesis, the sūtras – here referred to by Abbess B. (the *Lengyan [Śūramgama] Sūtra* and elsewhere the *Fanwangjing*), which are supposed to deal with specific female bodily processes might be of Chinese origin. The authenticity of the *Śūramgama Sūtra* has been questioned since its appearance in China (CBETA; Foguang Dictionary, 2001: 789). Levering (1987) discusses the claim of nuns that the morning liturgy, which consists mainly of the recitation of the *Lengyan* mantra, helps them to deal with sexual desire. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is strong evidence for the contention that the obsession with female biology in Buddhist discourse is distinctively Chinese. All scriptures I referred to throughout the thesis that are concerned with *female biology* have either been questioned with regard to their authenticity since their appearance in China, or have been established as apocryphal. Even though it is vital to analyze this argument in detail, I cannot do so at this point.

nun who lives her life in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.

Ms Sun stated a similar view: through concentration, focus on spiritual practice, and not falling prey to distractions induced by exterior phenomena, menstruation ceases. Likewise, Mr Da and his wife referred to the cessation of menstruation as the side effect of spiritual practice, not as its aim. Correspondingly, Dr Shu vehemently criticized women who practice meditation with the aim of inducing amenorrhea, a view with which Abbess B. agreed during the interview. They maintained that the women I described during the interview who aspired to spiritual amenorrhea are not real Buddhist practitioners, and labeled them as non-Buddhists. Nonetheless, the respective women did consider themselves Buddhist. However, most interlocutors who voiced their views vis-à-vis spiritual amenorrhea insisted spiritual amenorrhea to be *only* genuine, and thus attesting to spiritual attainments, if it occurs as a result of spiritual practice, as a *side effect*. It is then a *sign* of realization.

Perhaps, the spiritual cessation of menstruation is a non-canonical *siddhi*. *Siddhis* are secondary attainments that ensue with an increasing proficiency in meditation. Meditators are generally warned against becoming attached to such supernatural powers. However, no interlocutor identified the spiritual cessation of menstruation as *shentong*, or as a specific *siddhi*. So although it might appear as a *siddhi*, interlocutors did not conceptualize it that way. To sum up, interlocutors did not consider spiritual amenorrhea the *goal* of spiritual cultivation. This, they considered non-Buddhist, and indeed, interpreted it as a symptom of mental sickness.

In contrast to the cessation of menstruation as a corollary to spiritual cultivation, specific practices seem to exist that aim at "slaying the red dragon" – to use a Daoist idiom. A great mystery is spun around a Mainland-Chinese master who teaches a "yoga beyond

form", Chinese *Mi* 密教.[38] His name is only known to initiates, and would-be initiates, and his practices are performed in total secrecy. He lives hidden on a mountain, waiting for the right time to come out and teach (a Daoist euphemism, according to Chen, 2002: 323). Until then, he engages in constant meditation practice, and is only accessible to his students for two hours per day. His Taiwanese students stay in telephone contact with him, but it is apparently very difficult to call him. He is the fourth lineage holder of this particular tradition, and in contrast to the last one, who was a lay practitioner, he is a fully ordained monk. Books of the previous lineage holder appear to be freely available, and he is said to have gained fame in the United States. Yet the whereabouts and details of the current lineage holder are clouded in the mist of elusiveness.

Taiwanese are generally introduced to him by way of a friend, who knows of this practice, or practices him/herself. Yet the fact that they do engage in this practice is shrouded in mystery. Neither their friends, nor religious teachers should know about this special practice – still, people such as myself are "secretly" told about it. When I asked Shi De why she trusted this master, she replied that his predecessor was known for his *shentong*, recounting the instance of one woman whose arrival he had predicted, and who he initiated on a one to one basis. The woman subsequently attained some special powers. When I argued that *shentong* develops naturally with practice, Shi De reinforced her statement in claiming that he had told her, "this woman (i.e. you) practices everyday" when they first met, and asked her when she would start practicing, rather than "can you practice this?" She

[38] Note that the term for Vajrayāna Buddhism in Chinese is *Mijiao* 'Secret/Esoteric School' *versus Xianjiao* the 'Open/Exoteric School', playing on the tension between esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. Chinese Esoteric schools supposedly died out. When I raised this point, Shi De said, "not really, that's just what people believe". I also met a Western nun during the ordination period who practices Chinese *Mi*, and her response was similar to that of Shi De. Her master, their practices and so on are kept secret. It seems, though, that there is a resurgence of Chinese esoteric Buddhism as a number of people referred to it. As I stated in the section on ritualized gender inequality, though, these groups are not considered orthodox by the BAROC. The study of the contemporary Chinese Esoteric School would certainly be an interesting subject.

interpreted both statements as *shentong*, for she now practices this form of meditation, which, she argues, proves his clairvoyance.

But how do they practice? This remains another mystery. The vocabulary is clearly drawn from Vajrayāna Buddhism. Shi De practices in full lotus position, maintaining a certain *mudrā* (hand-gesture) for two hours under a cover (probably so that others cannot see it). During that time, she is neither allowed to move, nor allowed to speak, and softly utters *mantras*. Afterwards, she cannot wash her hands for thirty minutes, eat or drink, and should not imbibe "cold" foodstuffs in terms of Chinese medical theory. As indicated above, Shi De refers to it as *mi*, as the Chinese *mi*, not the Tibetan or Japanese version. Its designation *Wuxiang yüjia* 無相瑜珈[39] (Formless Yoga) implies that it corresponds to, or is superior to *Wushang yüjia* 無上瑜珈 (*Annutara*/Unexcelled Yoga), the highest yogic practice in the Vajrayāna, which Shi De saw as reflecting the superiority of her Chinese Esoteric meditation over her Tibetan practice, "you know, when you practice Vajrayāna, you still visualize yourself in the form of the deity. *This* practice, however, is *beyond* form." She unambiguously indicated this practice to be superior to everything else. After she had practiced for three days, she could already feel some results, hence she wanted me to travel to Mainland China to meet her master. Because I declined, I could not obtain more information about this practice.

The reader might ask what all this has to do with secondary amenorrhea. Well, this specific practice is tailored to end menstruation. Not that Shi De said so openly. Rather, it was mentioned in passing, clouded in secrecy, with a mysterious smile. Since she despises her menstruation, it is reasonable to infer that she practices this meditation to induce secondary amenorrhea. Most interlocutors considered spiritual amenorrhea the welcome result of advanced spiritual practice. This example, on the other hand, is embedded in the

[39] Note that all my interlocutors pronounced 珈 as "jia", and not "qie".

context of the rejection and repression of femininity by the interlocutor in her everyday life, and a concomitant aspiring to the suppression of a canonically female biological process. Here, the desired cessation of menstruation is not simply a by-product of spiritual cultivation. It is the main goal. Although, as for other ordained interlocutors, menstruation for Shi De seems to serve no purpose and is better removed, her rejection of menstruation is not just due to her ordained status, but must rather be understood in the context of her general aversion to femininity, as already discussed in Chapter Five.[40]

The ordained sister of Ms Cheng seems to practice a similar, or the same meditation. A comparison of the accounts of the masters and form of practice showed them as strikingly similar. Her sister claims to have stopped menstruating after having practiced this meditation for some time, but continues to practice it on a daily basis.[41] Only time can tell whether the same happens to Shi De. Interestingly, the initial stage of this practice extends over an intensive period of three months after which first attainments are supposedly achieved. However, after three months of intensive practice, Shi De's menstruation continued unabated. When I questioned her, she exclaimed, "No, it doesn't work that fast", and plans to practice this for another three years.[42] Interestingly, though, the prescribed length of intensive practice corresponds to the second stage of the Internal Alchemy meditation. So does the first stage, which takes 100 days, just like the Daoist practices of "slaying the red dragon" (Wile, 1992: 197).

Surprisingly, both informants are in their early forties, and both are nuns. Likewise, the other interlocutors who claimed to have stopped menstruating, or aimed at doing so, were in their forties, or older. The questionnaire indicated that among ordained women, mostly those aged between 30-50 knew of the spiritual cessation of menstruation, while most

[40] Informal Conversations, Taipei, Sep.-Nov. 2002.
[41] Informal Conversation, Taipei, Sep. 2002.
[42] Informal Conversation, Taipei, February 2003.

laywomen who knew of this phenomenon were in their fifties. Only a few of the younger women (20-30), lay and clerical, had heard about spiritual amenorrhea. Hence the question arises whether women of later age cohorts are simply weary of the monthly "inconvenience", as they phrased it. Is the burden of menstruation so strong in the minds of women of this generation that they reject it? Does this belief predominate among non-reproductive women? Is this belief slowly fading away, or have changed attitudes toward menstruation in general eroded this assumption? Or is it simply a frequent biological phenomenon among women of this age group, as medical researchers claim?

Among men who knew about this phenomenon, the age-spectrum comprised an almost equal number in all categories. While 8 men knew of the spiritual cessation of menstruation (25%) of the male respondents, only 19% of the female respondents knew of methods to induce amenorrhea. Further, most had been practicing Buddhists for ten years and more. An overwhelming majority considered themselves Pure Land Buddhists. Perhaps, due to the reliance on scriptures that represent women ambiguously, in this case the restriction on female rebirth in the Pure Land promulgated in the *Long Sukhavati Sūtra*, Buddhists try to come to terms with female embodiment. Since menstruation is one aspect of embodied womanhood, suppressing it may entail masculinization and thus an advancement in the spiritual hierarchy. But then, the majority of Buddhists in Taiwan are adherents of Pure Land Buddhism, thus this hypothesis requires further research.[43]

Most of the evidence for spiritual practices *specifically aimed* at inducing the cessation of menstruation had a very strong Daoist inflection. Even though Wile (1992) believes them to be Buddhist inventions, they are not widely invoked by Buddhists. Rather, an exclusive circle of practitioners is introduced to them. Although only two interlocutors referred to these specific practices, this does not eclipse the possibility that other Buddhists, who might

[43] This aspect corroborates arguments regarding the interrelation of text, belief and practice.

simply not have invoked them during conversations, do not know about them. Nevertheless, all data I have been able to collect, both in Taiwan, in the West, and among adherents of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism suggest these practices to be Chinese in origin. In Taiwan, however, it was difficult to obtain reliable information on these practices, practitioners and masters – though the questionnaire gathered useful data with regard to the inducement of the spiritual cessation of menstruation. The following table juxtaposes the results generated in interviews with those of the questionnaire.

Table 3: Different methods of inducing the spiritual cessation of menstruation

Questionnaires	**Number of respondents**	**Interviews/Conversations**
Meditation	4/1	Abbess B.: *samadhi*
Awakening	2	
Stream-enterer	2/2	Ms Li and Ms Sun: Attainment of Arhathood/Stream-enterer
Exhaustion of negative karma-sex change	2	
Change of sex (female into male)	2/1	Ms Gao: Overcoming of female/male dualism
Attainment of the stage of androgyny	1	
At the stage of Sagehood, no differentiation between male and female	1	
Keeping the precepts purely, and non-attachment	1/1	Abbess B's Master: Living in the spirit of Buddhism
Boundless purity/determination	1/1	Ms Sun: Dedication, focus on practice, not being distracted
Practice, meditation, and reciting the Buddha's name	1	
Spiritual practice influences hormones	1	
In *Qigong* "Slaying the Red Dragon"	1/2?	Shi De and the sister of Ms Cheng: Secret esoteric form of Chinese Buddhism
Daoist practice	1	

Nine respondents indicated that they did not know how to induce spiritual amenorrhea. Two stated spiritual amenorrhea to be impossible, and only one respondent explicitly stated that menstruation does not interfere with awakening. Of the twenty-one respondents who identified biological causes such as menopause, pregnancy, surgery and so on as inducing

amenorrhea, three also referred to spiritual factors. In total, twenty-one respondents expressly mentioned spiritual causes for amenorrhea. Six respondents referred to sexual change, in different wording, as bringing about the cessation of menstruation, testifying to the hypothesis that this phenomenon signifies the obliteration of femininity, and is closely connected to the belief in the sexual transformation of women into men, discussed in Chapters Two and Seven. The second most noted spiritual attainment that was considered to entail the cessation of menstruation was awakening, as well as Arhatship and stream-enterer. Of spiritual practices, meditation above all, or the attainment of single-pointed concentration was considered to lead to the spiritual cessation of menstruation. Further, one respondent referred to meditation, practice, and the recitation of the Buddha's name as inducing the spiritual cessation of menstruation. Two others referred to keeping the precepts purely, and non-attachment, as well as boundless purity/determination, respectively. Almost all the practices or spiritual attainments listed in the questionnaires also appeared in conversations and interviews. Both methods of investigation therefore yielded similar results. Moreover, apart from the specific Daoist practices, mentioned twice, all answers insinuated the spiritual cessation to be a by-product of spiritual cultivation and not its aim. Almost no respondent referred to specific practices to end menstruation.

Spiritual Amenorrhea and the Suppression of Femininity

Whereas these spiritual factors lead fairly gently to the elimination of menstruation, the prevalence of religiously sanctioned amenorrhea may be taken to indicate the continuity of negative attitudes toward the female body – unless the cessation of menstruation can be proven to truly occur due to spiritual practice, a question that requires long-term interdisciplinary research. Presently, however, it cannot be scientifically verified.

And so, while some practitioners content themselves with the natural onset of menopause, or the suppression of menstruation, others adopt rather drastic ways to terminate the monthly blood flow. A newspaper article recorded how some Taiwanese nuns had a hysterectomy to end the "curse": "The life of leaving home is trouble-free, like the clouds in the sky, yet the menses are still bothering. Some *bhiksunīs* have surgery to avoid troubles" (Chern, 2000: 239). Dr Shu confirmed this information. When nuns ask him about their menstruation, and have blood clots, he recommends hysterectomy, as "they don't have any use for the uterus anyway."[44] He depicted them as feminine for as long as the ovaries are not removed, but once they are removed, due to hormone changes, they actually resemble men. He emphasized such cases of amenorrhea to differ distinctively from spiritual amenorrhea – such women cannot be regarded as good practitioners on account of their ceasing specifically female functions. The newspaper article and his statement, however, leave no doubt that some women, nuns in particular, despise their female reproductive parts to the extent of total rejection, or removal.

This rejection is possibly a reflection of the broader repression of femininity in clerical Buddhism in Taiwan (which is analyzed in detail in Chapter Seven). Perhaps, amenorrhea is part of the religious package that makes a woman a good practitioner as it is taken to signify the realization of genderlessness, which "becomes implicitly, for a woman, a way to transform into a man – a spiritual transformation" (Faure, 2003: 122). This spiritual transformation is not purely mental, evidenced by religiously sanctioned amenorrhea. In aspiring to androgyny, or better, ascetic masculinity, Buddhist women are encouraged to repress and suppress their femininity in order to be recognized as outstanding practitioners. Unlike Daoists, who *transform* menstrual blood because it is potent, Buddhist women *suppress* their menstrual blood because it signifies inferiority. But in ceasing to menstruate, they

[44] Interview, 27.12.2002.

prove their ability to control bodily functions, sexuality, and desire.[45] And so, in this context, not the inscription of androgyny, as argued for Daoism, allows for the cessation of menstruation, but the rejection and suppression of biological femininity.[46] My empirical data supports this theory. Ms Gao suggested this connection when she stated that she menstruated again when she grasped at her femininity. In order to progress on the path, "femininity", represented by uterine blood and sensual underwear in her account, has to be "transcended".

In contrast to Ms Gao, Ms Hui not only claimed to have stopped menstruating. Similarly to Shi De, she repressed her femininity in everyday life. She dressed like a man, behaved as a traditional Chinese man, smoked a pipe, (virtually unheard of for Chinese women), and had several girlfriends whom she considered her 'concubines' (no matter whether they had sexual relations or not). Further, she chose the job of a traditional Chinese man – of a literati, and claimed to be physically more a man than a woman, often stating that in reality, she was a man in a woman's body, which she always enunciated when women were vilified in conversations. Accordingly, the repression of femininity pervades her spiritual, professional and private life. While her personal and psychological predispositions certainly contributed to this attitude, the cultural stigmata attached to female bodies and the propounded superiority of the male sex unmistakably influenced her attitude toward her own sex and women in general. In her Buddhist practice, she found yet another avenue for disparaging the female sex, and one may infer that she drew on such views precisely because of her psychological predisposition. Although her views are extreme, she draws on misogynist opinions of women which are deeply embedded in Taiwanese culture.

[45] It is noteworthy that practitioners of Internal Alchemy believed that sexual desire ceases with the production of the mental embryo, yet they did not necessarily espouse chastity.

[46] Furth (1999: 221) holds that the goal of Internal Alchemy was 'active androgyny'. Further, Schipper (1993: 127, 129) argues that Daoist adepts were required to "cultivate a feminine personality". Likewise, Zhang (1997: 38) posits androgyny to have been the ideal.

A similar scenario to Ms Hui is the psychological disposition and spiritual practice of Shi De, discussed earlier. Hence especially women who rejected their secular female role – nuns and the lesbian oriented Shi De and Ms Hui – openly aspired to the spiritual cessation of menstruation. In their everyday lives, they rejected not only cultural expectations, but also corporeal femininity. This reveals the alleged transcendence of femininity to be rather a repression and suppression of femininity, an inference corroborated by the rhetoric of the *Dazhangfu* (see Chapter Seven). However, not all women, not even those who were aware of this phenomenon's existence, aspire to attain this goal. Thus, this data provides strong evidence for the hypothesis that women who have qualms with their femininity employ spiritual, and even medical means to deal with their reproductive biology.

A number of reasons may explain why not all Buddhist women aspire to this ideal. Firstly, reproductive women who espouse medical views of menstruation may not aim at experiencing amenorrhea because it is considered pathological. Secondly, they might well be at ease with their female embodiment and femininity. Thirdly, spiritual amenorrhea might indicate a stage so exalted that ordinary women do not believe they are able to reach it. Fourthly, they might simply not believe in it. Fifthly, secondary amenorrhea is apparently only one of a set of signs that testify to spiritual attainments. As elaborated in Chapter One, ideas of and stories about masters who have *shentong* circulate widely among Buddhists in Taiwan, and might be a much more widespread and successful tactic to establish the spiritual eminence of monastics. The claim to an elevated spiritual state on account of secondary amenorrhea is perhaps only appealing to certain individuals. Maybe, it is an esoteric sub-discourse? Religiously sanctioned amenorrhea inverts the commonly accepted norm, but by privileging the suppression of (corporeal) femininity, it can act to the detriment of women practitioners – especially if they aspire to but do not experience spiritual amenorrhea.

Religiously sanctioned amenorrhea in conjunction with broader negative views of the female body, including the repression of femininity in clerical Buddhism, can certainly give rise to the suppression of corporeal femininity as symbolized in menstruation. It may not be surprising that among my interlocutors, especially nuns and two homosexual women aimed at the cessation of menstruation. For monastics in particular, menstruation seems to serve no other function than the repeated replenishment, or loss of blood. Dr Shu emphasized this in stating that nuns have hysterectomies because during menstruation they may be tired, but they still have to work in temples. Even so, a less materialistic interpretation would hold that *because* nuns are supposed to have renounced their sexuality, the cyclical reminder of their fertility in the form of menstrual blood calls their renunciation into question. Sexual desire is not only dependent on evanescent exterior stimuli. It is also associated with cyclical renewal. Since Chinese culture has long been conflating women's procreative functions with sexuality to the extent that sexuality is equated with menstruation, individuals may interpret menstruation as a sign of lingering sexual desire, a rather problematic issue for monastics. And so, it depends on the individual as to whether she can dissociate sexuality and menstruation. The way in which nuns cope with this recurrent reminder of fertility is determined by their respective spiritual training and wisdom.

Nonetheless, a question at stake remains *why* women internalize and reproduce the belief in the spiritual cessation of menstruation. It is therefore pertinent to ask what the belief in the spiritual cessation of menstruation offers women? The conversations in which amenorrhea was invoked by the interlocutors themselves centered on spiritual attainments. In all cases, it was clear that reference to spiritual amenorrhea was made to attest to the spiritual attainment of the respective woman. All interlocutors who knew about and believed in spiritual amenorrhea lived in a very animated religious world imbued with spirits, ghosts, Bodhisattvas and various kinds of spiritual and mystical experiences and feats. Yet

these conversations occurred mainly in a single-sex environment. A spiritually amenorrheic woman can establish herself as being higher in the spiritual hierarchy vis-à-vis women. But how about vis-à-vis men? Does spiritual amenorrhea demonstrate a woman's spiritual attainments only apropos women, or also in relation to men? Or is spiritual amenorrhea merely an equalizing factor, that is, in ceasing to menstruate, women approach the level of male practitioners, which is predestined and does not require verification?

Dr Shu, the doctor of Chinese medicine cited earlier, stated explicitly that there is *absolutely* no need for men to prove their spiritual attainments, as they *already* are men [*sic*]. When questioned as to whether there is a correlate in the spiritual cultivation of men, he said, "Not really", despite his previous reference to a reduced semen production as analogous. Further, as stated above, he withdrew his initial appraisal of the spiritual cessation of menstruation when asked about a comparable phenomenon in men. *Then*, he considered it *only* the beginning of *her* spiritual career, which was nothing exceptional, really, in his opinion. He might have argued along these lines *because* men simply have no proof for their diminished sexual desire, as posited earlier. Thus the cessation of menstruation is primarily seen as a verification of great spiritual attainment among women, in a single-sex environment.

Nevertheless, one female interlocutor, a friend of Dr Shu, retorted that men have to engage in certain analogous practices, but the other interlocutors did not allow her to her finish her ruminations. Although several respondents indicated that a similar phenomenon exists in men, but they were in the minority (13 *versus* 23). Dr Shu stated clearly that men who physically change, that is, feminize, must have a biological defect. The biological determinant of the alleged transcendence of gender in Taiwanese Buddhism *only* applies to women. This rejection *and* suppression of corporeal femininity bespeaks of pervasive androcentric tendencies. Chapter Seven revisits this question.

Genuine Cases of the Spiritual Cessation of Menstruation?

Some claimed to have experienced the spiritual cessation of menstruation, while several others hypothesized about it. By contrast, Abbess B. claimed her teacher to have truly reached this stage at the age of 35. Abbess B. emphasized that this was due to her spiritual mastery. After her teacher died, her body produced a relic in the form of a meditating figurine which is said to resemble Guanyin.[47] The description of her master, and the relic, leave little room for doubting that she is considered outstanding, for relics in the form of deities and so on are rare. They are believed to be the testimony to intense spiritual cultivation, yet it is impossible to retrospectively ascertain whether her cessation of menstruation was induced by spiritual factors, or due to other influences.[48] Abbess B. described her master as follows:

> Abbess B: "My master was quite a *Dazhangfu*. My master was an abbess who expressed seven emotions and six desires very sincerely, clearly, understandingly. She was a master who read widely, and was a scholar, too. There was no empty spot in her time... she was a master who never wasted her time."
> Q: "I still don't quite understand the thing about menstruation."
> Abbess B: "Neither do I."
> Q: "So is your teacher the only (person) you know who had this experience?"
> Abbess B: "Yes, because we rarely talk about such issues... when she was lecturing on the *Lengyan Sūtra*, she told me privately."[49]

According to Abbess B., the cessation of menstruation due to spiritual factors is not a topic Buddhists openly talk about. Only during a private conversation her master informed her of this phenomenon. None of Abbess B's disciples knew of this until they overheard

[47] The relic, which was probably part of the spinal column, resembled a meditating figure.
[48] Interview, 26.12.2002.
[49] Interview, 13.01.2003. This is the interview I refer to in the *Prologue*. I tried to prompt Abbess B. during the interview, but to no avail. While she had openly talked about these issues in previous discussion, she resorted to "I don't know" in many instances to end the questioning process. She clearly showed me where my limits were in her "Neither do I" – in her negation she simply refused to discuss any further. She was cold, distanced and short in her comments on the questions I asked that were important to the research, questions she was happy to talk about in more detail *without* a tape recorder. In this conversation, she ostensibly used her position as an abbess to bring my questioning to a halt, using a rather threatening facial expression when I dared to asked too much.

our conversation. Abbess B. maintained not to have told her disciples, ordained and lay, because she thinks that there is no need to do so.

I have been unable to find *living* practitioners in Taiwan who have experienced the spiritual cessation of menstruation. Nonetheless, a number of women claim to have experienced spiritual amenorrhea in the past. Yet whether secondary amenorrhea can be induced by religious practices cannot be determined at this point, a question presently not at issue. Here, the concern is with its cultural associations and doctrinal connections. Formerly, the ascetic ideal of nuns is said to have "verged on holy anorexia" (Faure, 2003: 26), which might explain the historical connection between secondary amenorrhea and the Buddhist clergy.

However, unlike insinuated by the results of the questionnaire, spiritual amenorrhea may not be a unique Buddhist or Chinese phenomenon. Four (Western) informants related their experience of spiritual amenorrhea during extensive meditative practice in the first case,[50] during the stay at a temple and *ashram* in a second and third case,[51] and during the length of a retreat in the fourth case.[52] They stated that their menstruation resumed: in the first case when she reverted back to her usual (feminine) role; in the second and third when they left the temple/*ashram*; and in the fourth when she came out of retreat. They had stopped menstruating extemporaneously, and only for a short time *without* having prior knowledge of the existence of this phenomenon. Only the third interlocutor did *not* explain her amenorrhea as stemming from spiritual factors. In a similar vein, a practitioner of Vajrayāna Buddhism claimed to have been told that women stop menstruating if they spend

[50] Conversation with a Western Buddhist nun, who was then a Hindu practitioner, Kaohsiung Dec. 2002.
[51] Conversation with a Western lay Buddhist who experienced spiritual amenorrhea while she lived in a monastery in Kaohsiung county, June 2002, Taipei, the third one being a Western Vajrayāna practitioner who was at the time of her spiritual amenorrhea a Hindu practitioner, Kathmandu, Feb. 2004. I will discuss these cases in detail in a future paper after further comparative research as to date, my data regarding the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition is insufficient, and my focus here is with Taiwan.
[52] Conversation with a Western Vajrayāna practitioner in May 2003, Canberra, who explained her amenorrhea as the result of malnutrition and anemia.

much time in caves, and in a novel situated in the Tibetan community in exile, the main protagonist is taught a practice to stop her menstruation for reasons of practicability when sent into retreat. (Nevertheless, the author Ms Olvedi replied in a personal communication that she had learned about this practice in a Daoist, not Buddhist context).[53] Clearly, not only Taiwanese Buddhists have peculiar ideas and unrecorded experiences when it comes to spiritual practice, menstruation and amenorrhea.

Conclusion

While the focus of this chapter is with Taiwanese Buddhism, it is important to emphasize that spiritual amenorrhea may not be a mere *concept*. It may well be a surreptitious *phenomenon* in different religious traditions. However, the *belief* in the spiritual cessation of menstruation, or religiously sanctioned amenorrhea, has deep implications for Taiwanese women. It can result in a rejection of corporeal femininity, and less frequently in the repression of femininity, more rarely extending to the suppression of menstruation. It has been possible to document spiritual amenorrhea, and one case of a deceased nun who is said to have ceased to menstruate due to spiritual merit, but it was impossible to find sufficient genuine living proofs of this phenomenon among Buddhists in Taiwan. Abbess B. argued the spiritual cessation of menstruation to exist, but that it is difficult to find practitioners of that level, for today's environment is not conducive to such high spiritual attainments. Rigorous spiritual practice is required to reach them, and in today's distracting environment, strong spiritual practitioners are rare. Spiritual amenorrhea might be a phenomenon of the past. Still, its memory survives in the imagination of spiritual practitioners in the present.

[53] A Western Vajrayāna Buddhist nun revealed that she was surprised to see her menstruation continuing after her ordination, as someone had told her that she would stop menstruating as a nun (Jan. 2002).

☙ *Chapter Seven* ❧
Visions of the *Dazhangfu*: The Masculinization of Female Buddhists

> If one does not perceive the Real Nature of the Tathāgata inherent in oneself, even though one is regarded a man in this world, I (Gautama Buddha) maintain that such a person is a woman. And correspondingly, if a woman has perceived the Real Nature of the Tathāgata inherent in her own life, even though she is regarded as a woman in this world, such a person is a man (*Sūtra of the Great Demise*, trans. by Ueki, 2001: 93).[1]

What signifies being a man? What signifies being a woman? Neither exists inherently according to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine. And yet, this passage associates awakening with being a man. Since the realization of one's inherent nature is characterized as being male, those who have not "perceived the Real Nature of the Tathāgata inherent in themselves" are considered women. Consequently, this excerpt associates spiritual unawareness with being a woman while spiritual awakening is epitomized as a male domain, achievable by women as long as they "perceive their Real Nature".

On the one hand, then, this quotation subverts biologically determined concepts of sex, or cultural constructed concepts of gender, implying that they neither derive from the body, nor from social norms. An awakened person is called a man, no matter what his, or her biological sex is. On the other hand, if taken literally, this statement can be used to assert the male character of spiritual insight, hence the superiority of the male sex. By this reading, masculinity and femininity could be juxtaposed in the same way as awakening and ignorance.

Another (possibly indigenous Chinese) scripture, the *Sūtra on Changing the Female Sex*, also portrays spiritual awakening as a male sphere: By giving rise to the thought of awakening, *bodhicitta*, women attain "the great and good person's state of mind, a *man's state of mind*, a sage's state of mind" (Paul, 1985: 176; emphasis mine). In both texts, spiritual

[1] According to the Foguang Dictionary (2001: 839), 大般泥洹經 is the Chinese title for *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*.

perfection is conceived as a male domain.

Gross (1993: 178) believes that ascetic masculinity is a basic requirement for attaining Buddhahood in much of Buddhism. Levering (1982: 24), by contrast argues that the attainment of a male body was not a prominent theme in Chan Buddhism, a historically verifiable assessment. As Chapter Three elucidated, Buddhist laywomen in Taiwan can draw on traditional maternal female ideals in their religious lives. In general, "women are allowed to develop certain kinds of religious identity – for example, that of the virtuous wife and good mother [...] or that of the celibate nun, whose status as a valued religious person depends on her ability to transcend her sexuality" (Levering, 1991: 222).

Yet this transcendence of sexuality also often entails the rejection and sometimes suppression of femininity. Specifically *feminine* mainstream ideals appear to be primarily significant for lay Buddhists, or those not intent on attaining liberation in this lifetime. They are possibly ideals of those who practice with rather worldly motivations while most female interlocutors who aimed at liberation in this life aspired to ideals that are distinctively ***not*** feminine. As Levering states, nuns have to transcend their sexuality to achieve a higher status in the religious hierarchy. This transcendence of sexuality entails assuming a masculine appearance, performing a mental and corporeal masculinity – an aspiration that may even entail the spiritual cessation of menstruation, as analyzed in the previous chapter, where Abbess B. described her non-menstrual master above all as a *Dazhangfu* 大丈夫, literally 'Great Man'. Thus the masculinization of female Buddhists and the spiritual cessation of menstruation might be connected. In becoming outstanding practitioners, women quite possibly stop menstruating as part of their cultivation of the *Dazhangfu* ideal. In this way, the discourse on the spiritual cessation of menstruation reflects the belief in the *Dazhangfu*, a Buddhist ideal in Taiwan that appears to be distinctively Chinese, and that can be traced back to the (Chinese) interpretation of certain Indian Buddhist concepts.

This thesis alluded to the Chinese Buddhist concept of the *Dazhangfu* in several instances. Since studies of the *Dazhangfu* primarily analyze it in a historical context (Levering, 1982; 1992; Hsieh, 1981), I understood it as a phenomenon of the past. The 'Great Man' appeared to have vanished long ago.

During fieldwork in Taiwan, however, the frequency with which I was praised for looking like a man evidenced a vibrant *Dazhangfu* discourse. Often, women portrayed me as 莊嚴 *zhuangyan* (dignified/elegant), or beautiful.[2] When responding, "I don't think so, especially not after ordination", they replied that I looked like a monk, which was seen as the source of my being *zhuangyan*. They then instantaneously connected this physical appearance to spiritual prowess. Ms Sun, who had practiced Pure Land Buddhism for decades before she converted to Vajrayāna Buddhism, for instance, instigated the following conversation when we first met:

> We are talking about a famous Taiwanese monk when she extemporaneously tells me that I am *zhuangyan* because I look like a man, and that men are better practitioners than women. She states explicitly the belief that women transform physically into men as their practice flourishes. She recounts a conversation with a nun who told her that they wish to look like men because men are better practitioners, and that nuns pray to be reborn as men. She believes if women – or nuns – look like men, they will be reborn in a male body, and then be able to attain awakening. Upon questioning, she says that she believes this to be true.[3]

Ms Sun was not the only person who linked my physical appearance to spiritual prowess. I regularly had to (reluctantly) participate in similar conversations. Masculinity was obviously still a monastic beauty ideal. At first I thought these views to be the influence of an archaic *Dazhangfu* rhetoric still lingering in popular imagination, but it became increasingly clear that the *Dazhangfu* discourse remains vibrant in Taiwan today. And so, this

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[2] It took me a long time to determine what *zhuangyan* actually signifies. The interviews I cite later indicate that *zhuangyan* is associated with masculinity, and Buddhist statues in particular. I remain unsure as to why only women commented on my physical appearance. Maybe it is simply not appropriate for a man to comment on the looks of a nun, but it might be equally possible that men don't think along similar lines. For them, I might well have looked 'feminine'. I will return to this question below.

[3] Informal conversation in Taoyuan city, 23.10.2001

chapter brings to light what has been obscured by the shadow of the past. It examines contemporary *Dazhangfu.*

This chapter first investigates the historical phenomenon of the *Dazhangfu* in the context of Chinese culture and in relation to Buddhist doctrines, after which it provides a survey of the contemporary *Dazhangfu* discourse based on empirical data. The conclusion traces the continuity of *Dazhangfu* rhetoric and discusses its significance for Buddhists today. It concludes with the argument that although the discourse on the *Dazhangfu* gives women (specifically nuns) the possibility of living their spiritual lives in a way that breaks dramatically with social norms, the *Dazhangfu* rhetoric can also be seen as working to their detriment. As in so many aspects of life, masculinity is regarded as the norm and femininity has to be rejected, dispensed with, repressed, or suppressed if women desire to attain higher status in organized religion and religious accomplishment, perhaps because it is assumed that, "the female defects – greed, hate and delusion, and other defilements – are greater than the male's, [...] because I wish to be freed from the impurities of the woman's body, I will acquire the beautiful and fresh body of a man" (*Sūtra on Changing the Female Sex*, trans. by Paul, 1985: 308) Ideally, the attainment of a male body occurs within this very lifetime (Müller, 1993: 177) – when a woman transforms into a *Dazhangfu*, a great man.[4]

However, Chinese, or Taiwanese Buddhism is not the only religious tradition in which women transform into hyper-men, or "heroes". Several scholars have noted how in Christianity, androcentrism resulted in the "patristic adaption of the *viagro*, the female military hero who achieves equivalence, or indeed, eminence, in the world by becoming not a great woman but, as it were, a man (*vir*)" (Mc Laughlin, 1974: 234, quoted in Goldman, 2001: 79) – Western historical examples might include Joan of Arc.

[4] Note that in Vajrayāna Buddhism, transformation of women into men "is not a prominent theme" (Humes, 1996: 131).

While this is not a comparative study, it is important to note that similar values, forces and ideas pervade different religions. As such, they might not be attributed to the respective religions alone, but could be regarded as (perhaps universal) products of patriarchy. These comparable expressions of female masculinization were conceivably female *rebellions against* restrictions imposed on women. However, these "rebellions" still complied with androcentrism, perhaps because women had no choice other than *compliance with* androcentric role models if they aspired to religious excellence. The *Dazhangfu* phenomenon, for instance, shows certain power structures and beliefs in contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan as encouraging the masculinization of Buddhist women, but not of all women. Correspondingly, some may view the *Dazhangfu* as a rebellion against hegemonic femininity and male dominance while others may interpret this ideal as a symptom of the utmost absorption of male and masculine idea(l)s. Although the choice of individuals is personal and can thus not be universalized, the socio-religious context does influence the respective decision decisively.

The Dazhangfu in Historical Perspective

Contemporary dictionaries translate the term *Dazhangfu* as: a real man, a man of great courage, a hero, a virtuous man, echoing Classical Chinese expositions of the *Dazhangfu.* This indigenous concept was in vogue in Chinese philosophy before Buddhism was transmitted to China. According to Levering, the term first implied "physical strength and power of will", but Confucians aimed at transforming it into a concept referring to "moral greatness" (Levering, 1992: 143). Yet, Levering emphasizes, the term *always* underlined "manliness as opposed to womanliness". In classical Chinese, then, *Dazhangfu(han)* referred "to that which in *men* is a *virtue* and in *women* is either *non-existent* or not a virtue" (Levering, 1992: 145; emphasis mine). Confucianism was not alone in this assessment of masculinity.

Indian Buddhist discourse encompassed a related concept, the *Mahāpurusa*, the 'Great Man' (see Chapter Two for details). It is uncertain whether the Indian term *Mahāpurusa* implied particular masculine attributes other than social position, but the Chinese term *Dazhangfu* certainly did so. Hence, when Chinese Buddhists used this term to translate the *Mahāpurusa*, it had by then a masculine connotation (Levering, 1992: 144). And so, the use of an indigenous Chinese concept, deployed in the translation of an Indian Buddhist term gave rise to the Chinese *Dazhangfu* as expounded in later Chinese Buddhist literature and in contemporary Taiwan. The following table, based on Levering's (1992: 141-143) discussion of the *Dazhangfu*, shows how the *Dazhangfu* signified above all mental traits:

Table 4: The *Dazhangfu* during the Song

Recorded Sayings of Yuanwu	**Ven. Dahui**[5]
Courageous	Tough
Fearless	Brave
Does not look up to anybody	Ferocious
Independent	
Cares about his own way	
Vis-à-vis awakening:	Vis-à-vis awakening:
Is able to reach awakening directly	Great karmic preparation for awakening
Pays no attention to arguments and such distractions	Can break through to awakening in a single stroke
Does not get caught up in words, pursuing intellectual understanding, or useless efforts to be smart	Has great capacities
	Has no fear of 'mouth-karma'
	Does not investigate carefully
Wields the sword of wisdom	If he comes across a snake he breaks it in 2
Breaks wrong thoughts into pieces	Unstoppable
Steps on the liver of demons	Saves all beings
Firmness of will	Does not care for his/her own life
Determination	Undistractable
Ability to ignore external conditions	Determination
Pays no attention to what happens in his mind	Goes straight to the heart of the matter
	A Bodhisattva
Does not look up to sages	Does not look but not leap
Does not look down on ordinary people	Does not half doubt and half believe
Can break through the city of illusion	

[5] Ven. Dahui was a Chan master of the Song dynasty – see Levering's studies for detail.

Both exegeses of the *Dazhangfu* unanimously indicate that in the Chan discourse of the Song dynasty, *Dazhangfu* referred solely to mental characteristics. It encompassed character traits which were culturally labeled masculine at that time. Significantly, the term was applied to both men and women, but among the latter, only to exceptional women (Levering, 1992: 144-145). The mind of a female *Dazhangfu* was undoubtedly considered masculine, but physically, she was still a woman: "When you look at her, you see a woman, but this is like the actions of a man, and she is able to complete the affairs of a great hero" (Levering, 1992: 147).[6] In this way, the women referred to as *Dazhangfu* were portrayed as resembling men in their dealings with the world, and most notably, in their spiritual cultivation. Physically, however, lady Jinguo was not considered masculine.

By the time of the Ming dynasty, however, the term already encompassed different nuances: the female master Zhiyuan Xinggang (1597-1654) was not only described as having the *mental* attitude of a *Dazhangfu*, but also as *physically* resembling a man (Grant, 1996: 73-74). Thus in the beginning, courage, determination, and so on were seen as vital characteristics of the *Dazhangfu*, while at later points in history, the *Dazhangfu* was apparently considered a mental *and* physical state of mind. And so, the term *Dazhangfu* remained in use throughout the centuries, but its connotations seem to have changed. While archival data does not yet provide irrefutable evidence, current data lend credence to the hypothesis that the Chinese image of the *Dazhangfu* transformed from a concept which solely applied to mind and its capacities for action to a concept which also included the physical body. Today, physical as well as mental traits distinguish the *Dazhangfu*.

A significant influence on the female *Dazhangfu* stems from Buddhist discourse. Segments of Buddhist sūtras held that women could be considered as men and *vice versa*, depending on their mental make-up. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Two, some sūtras

[6] Ven. Dahui praising lady Jinguo.

and later Buddhist writings contained stories and theories regarding the transformation of Buddhist women. Such stories implied according to Paul (1981: 66) that women become mentally masculine. Nonetheless, the sex-transformation stories in sūtras depict not only the minds, but also the bodies of protagonists as changed, probably the most prominent influence on the rhetoric of the masculinization of female Buddhists:

> Some texts tell us that at a certain point, the person receives assurance of never again having to be reborn as a woman! At the highest stage of Bodhisattvahood, she or he was understood to be beyond gender and choose gender at will. The person could acquire "skill in means" [*upāya*] abilities to enlighten beings, as well as other supernormal powers. These include transformation into various shapes and projecting a mentally created body. (Levering, 2000: 145).

Similarly, the *Abhidarmakośa* by Vasubandhu suggests physical as well as mental characteristics of women to change when women advance in meditative practice. This might support the theory that physical transformation beliefs applied to *living* women and not only *literary* protagonists. Nevertheless, since Mahāyāna Buddhism vanished in India, it is impossible to ascertain whether these views circulated widely.

The sex transformation stories in sūtras met fertile ground when they were transplanted to Chinese soil. As Chapter Two demonstrates, these Buddhist concepts encountered Chinese constructions of the body, gender and sex which differed significantly from those of the present: Chinese cosmological speculations the sex of the individual body fluid. Physical embodiment alone did not determine gender or sex, and sexual transformation was considered a pervasive possibility, based on general theories of transformation, as evidenced in the *Book of Changes*, the *Yijing* 易經. To recap: sexual transformation was predicated on the view that the body is controlled by *Yin* and *Yang*, the dominance of either force determining the respective sex. Thus, a change in the balance of these forces could lead to sex and gender reversal.

Considering both these Chinese and Buddhist roots, it is less surprising that Chinese Buddhists believe(d) the sex and gender of women to be transmutable. Becoming a *Dazhangfu* was a logical and even viable option. What is more, Chinese culture viewed social gender and performance as overshadowing biological sex, so there was much room for gender crossing. As Furth (1988: 24) posits, "where individuals were socially powerful and/or had the capacity to act upon the world, their sex organs and acts would be gendered as male. Female gender, on the other hand, was identified with those powerless persons whose bodies were read as defective." Her statement sheds much light on the construction of the *Dazhangfu*, for in accord with her argument and Levering's statement cited earlier, the *Dazhangfu* is the anithesis of ordinary femininity. Biological sex alone does not determine the *Dazhangfu*. In line with Chinese constructions then, the gender transformation in the framework of the *Dazhangfu* is based on the fluidity of gender and sex, enabling women (and men) to be 'Great Men'.

Chinese culture, posit Brownell *et al.*, did not focus primarily on embodiment to determine gender. It was often more important "whether one acted in ways seen as masculine or feminine" (Brownell *et al.*, 2001b: 25), which confirms the importance placed on performance as the driving force behind the transformation of a female practitioner into a *Dazhangfu*. Furth (1999: 12), in reference to Butler, writes, "gender is in fact a performance of the body, a cultural aesthetics of self-fashioning that constructs modern sexual identities". Butler's assessment of gender as a performance also applies to the Chinese and Taiwanese *Dazhangfu* material, both historical and contemporary.

The Dazhangfu in Contemporary Practice

Most interlocutors primarily considered monks as *Dazhangfu*, and mainly monastics appeared to aim at becoming a *Dazhangfu* – I was astonished about the frequency by which nuns praised each other for looking like a *Dazhangfu* during the ordination period. Hence in the Buddhist context, above all, or even only, monastics are called *Dazhangfu*. Nevertheless, according to Abbess B., the concept *Dazhangfu* should also be applied to the laity:

> Abbess B.: "When I had just been ordained I assumed that *Dazhangfu* only applies to monastics, now I don't think that way. Today in the 21st century, all the great enterprises, great leaders, very good presidents, although they're not monastics, [...] they must surely be *Dazhangfu*. If they weren't *Dazhangfu*. Wouldn't the country perish? [...] we used to chant "Virtuous indeed (善哉), *Dazhangfu*, who is able to understand the path of impermanence" and prostrated at the same time."[7]

Only Abbess B. did not deem monastic status a requisite for being considered a *Dazhangfu*. However, the examples she provided were essentially drawn from social positions that are generally considered male domains. Indeed, her narrative contains several clues. While she now considers the possibility of laypeople becoming a *Dazhangfu*, in the beginning of her monastic career, she thought the term to only apply to the Buddhist clergy. Interpretations of the *Dazhangfu* are therefore subject to change. With growing self-confidence, Abbess B. developed her own vision (she became an abbess when she was still in her twenties). Nonetheless, as stated before, the *Dazhangfu* was an indigenous Chinese concept that existed long before Buddhism came to China, and that was applied to statesmen and so on. Thus Abbess B's revised interpretation of the Buddhist *Dazhangfu* may not be an innovation. Rather, her view corresponds to the Confucian *Dazhangfu*. Still, her statement leaves no doubt regarding the gender of the *Dazhangfu*. Although elsewhere in the interview, she defined the term as beyond gender, her examples of the contemporary *Dazhangfu* refer clearly to a realm that privileges men, the public sphere and big enterprises.

[7] Interview, 16.01.2003.

While there may be laywomen who aspire to this ideal, they appear not to be doing so in a Buddhist context. Ms Lin, cited in Chapter Four, claimed how in order to survive in the business sphere, women are required to become like men. This can also be observed in the political arena, where competing women are called 自強女 *ziqiangnü*, ("self-empowered" women). During elections, Ms Xüe commented that particularly in politics, women have to comply with models of masculine hegemony which are characterized by stamina, a loud voice and masculine macho demeanor. Further, she emphasized that not only the expectations of female politicians have changed. So had those of male statesmen, who, she argued, were more refined, gentle and cultured in traditional Confucian society.[8] Changes in mainstream models of masculinity have therefore taken place in Taiwan, perhaps in response to Western influences, perhaps in response to the perceived constant threat of a possible invasion from Mainland China. Louie, for instance, maintains that due to Western influences, hyper-masculinization characterized masculinity in the 1980s in Mainland China (Louie, 2002: 84). Similar factors may have contributed to the current hegemony of hyper-masculinity in Taiwan, an interesting question calling for further study.

Whereas the masculine female politician is fairly common, the *Dazhangfu* may not be a viable ideal for Buddhist laywomen. Firstly, as procreative women, laywomen have other options in their choice of role models: the wife and mother (Tsomo, 1999c: 9). Nuns, by contrast, adhere to different norms: "The full tonsure, which was in some cases a mark of infamy for a woman, could also be a mark of exalted spiritual status, the proof that she had symbolically become a monk: that is, an allegedly genderless being" (Faure, 2003: 44). A number of interlocutors thought their level of practice was indicated by the fact that they were laywomen. Because they are not monastics, they cannot reach the level of *Dazhangfu*.

[8] Conversation, Kaohsiung, October 2001.

Q: So do you personally think that you can become *Dazhangfu*?
B: How long would we have to practice so that we eventually would become like a *Dazhangfu*? How to practice? I don't know...
A: But we haven't approached...
B: We're not up to that level.
Q: Is the *Dazhangfu* you refer to a monastic or a layperson? Can a laywoman be a *Dazhangfu*?
C: Laywomen?
B: It looks like a *Dazhangfu* is just like that...[9]

These three interlocutors were dedicated practitioners who recited sūtras for several hours per day, but they did not aspire to the ideal of the *Dazhangfu*. They did not deem themselves unfit to be regarded as *Dazhangfu* because they had different role models in mind. They did so because they thought themselves not to be "up to the level" of a *Dazhangfu*. Hence the *Dazhangfu* appears as largely beyond the reach of ordinary women. They were perplexed when I asked them whether a laywoman could be a *Dazhangfu*. "A *Dazhangfu* is just like that", they replied, which refers to the first part of the interview, quoted below, where the three respondents agreed the *Dazhangfu* was essentially masculine. This depicts the *Dazhangfu* as a role model for nuns, and not of laywomen, primarily because they consider themselves incapable of reaching this goal. Thus, the Buddhist female *Dazhangfu* may be essentially a monastic ideal.[10]

Nuns are in several ways encouraged to identify with masculinity. Chapter Four analyzed the linguistic androcentrism characteristic of Buddhism in Taiwan. A comparable facet surfaced during the *bhiksunī* ordination. The nuns were not asked, "are you women?" The question was "汝是女中丈夫否 (*ru shi nüzhong zhangfu fou*) – are you female men?" The nuns had to answer: "是女中丈夫 (*shi nüzhong zhangfu*) – we are female men." (It goes without saying that the monks were not asked, "Are you male women?") During an interview, Shi Wu referred to this as a sign of monastics being de-sexed. Nonetheless, the

[9] Interview, 17.01.2003.
[10] I do not know whether laymen aspire to the *Dazhangfu* paradigm.

fact that she did note and comment on it shows that she deemed it remarkable enough to warrant contemplation and commentary. As Faure (2003: 12) remarks:

> In some cases, the ordination ritual itself [...] is said to symbolically (or magically) transform women into men [...] To realize non-duality between man and woman is to become a "true man", not a "true woman".

In teachings on the *Bhiksunī Prātimoksa*, Abbess A. told the newly ordained nuns that they have to become like men, but not how.[11] When I asked several nuns whether I had misunderstood her, I encountered much stupefaction. Nobody quite knew what she meant by "becoming like men". This demonstrates the *Dazhangfu* rhetoric as influential. Even so, not all women are acquainted with its details. Nevertheless, nuns habitually praised each other for looking like men, like *Dazhangfu*, which does indicate the pervasiveness of the *Dazhangfu* ideal. This observation is corroborated by Chern (2000: 303): "some nuns even wear underwear normally designed for males; large breasts are to them an obstacle to practice [...] *Dazhangfu* is the most important point of departure for their practice". Correspondingly, one Western nun noted how some nuns conform to physical androcentrism in binding-down their breasts so as to look like men.[12]

Chern (2000) reported how Ven. Cheng-yen unofficially encourages her nuns to be like men, which substantiates the hypothesis that nuns are encouraged to repress their femininity. On the way to a temple in Northern Taiwan, a Western nun and I discussed gender issues with Shi Da and Shi Fa, who adamantly expressed the conviction that a good practitioner is masculine, and that one *has* to become a man to attain Buddhahood. They firmly held to the masculine *Dazhangfu* ideal and were slightly disgruntled when I pointed out how views of Western Buddhists of the Vajrayāna tradition differ. They then finally stopped praising me as a *Dazhangfu* (which is why the discussion occurred in the first place,

[11] Triple Platform Ordination.
[12] Personal communication with bhiksuni Karma Palmo, 09. August 2001.

as I opposed that label). They were stupefied when during the meeting with Abbess B. they persistently acclaimed her as a *Dazhangfu*, only to find themselves ignored. Then Abbess B. raised the issue of gender inequality, got up, jumped around, and pointed at her genital region, and yelled:

> Abbess B.: "What's the use of a male sex organ other than being able to pee while standing! I don't want to pee that way. I don't need a penis! Awakening is beyond such rubbish. Women can make it and they don't need a male sex organ to do so. The *Dazhangfu* is in the mind. It is the mind of a truly enlightened person, someone who has the courage to attain awakening, of someone who is beyond duality. I believe. I know that women can make it. All that nonsense about women's mental afflictions being deeper seated than those of men. Who says so, and who can prove it anyway? I'm a woman in one life and a man in another. It's just a change of body. Awakening is beyond the body, beyond form and sex/gender. They say nuns have more rules because they're more defiled, but I don't think so. Practice makes people enlightened, not the body [paraphrase]".[13]

On our way back home, Shi Da and Shi Fa hastened to add that the view I had voiced before might not be so wrong; for, after all, such an outstanding abbess had qualms with the physical transformation of women into men, too. Abbess B. first ignored being called a *Dazhangfu*, and later called the contemporary obsession with the outer appearance of the *Dazhangfu* into question. This graphically illustrates how the *Dazhangfu* is currently imagined to be masculine, and as (physically) male.

Abbess B. is contextually performative, and in an audience of female monastics, she expressed a view that does not quite correspond to her quotidian performance of the *Dazhangfu*. Moreover, during later conversations, in the presence of laypeople, and of a tape-recorder, she imparted a very different, even contradictory impression. Nonetheless, her strong statement in the presence of Taiwanese and Western nuns shows clearly that corresponding to the earliest depictions, she believes the *Dazhangfu* to be a *state of mind* rather than a *physical characteristic*. In an interview, she argued as follows:

[13] Interview, 13.12.2002.

> Abbess B.: "I understand what you mean. When I was first ordained I espoused that kind of concept ... but then, after having accepted male disciples, I often thought this to be an insignificant issue. If one isn't male, can one be a *Dazhangfu*? Is it only men who have demeanor and forbearance? After having investigated this matter for some time .... I thought this should be changed. We can't say that because someone is male he's got the demeanor and forbearance of a *Dazhangfu*. Rather, we should argue that all humans should have the demeanor of a *Dazhangfu*, and the mind to benefit others. No matter whether one is male or female, everybody should aspire to the *Dazhangfu* [ideal]s, that is [one should be] positive, optimistic and daring. What does this stand for? Well, a person should, in accordance with the time and place, have the mind to benefit others. *That's* a *Dazhangfu*. Why? Because such a person has left self-centeredness behind. There is no difference between male and female... as for my perspective, that stuff about males and females is [rather] alien."[14]

In contrast to Abbess A., who, apart from teachings on the *Bhiksuni Pratimoksa* also stressed the need to become like men in a private conversation, Abbess B. advanced her own apparently de-sexed interpretation of the *Dazhangfu*. Abbess B's view stands at odds with the beliefs of most interlocutors and that of Abbess A. This illustrates that although the presently widespread interpretation considers masculinity as normative, some individuals interpret the *Dazhangfu* differently. But, these individuals are at the fringes of the monastic power structure.[15] Such outspoken interlocutors were, no matter how refreshing, as rare and difficult to find as a needle in a heap of straw. Nevertheless, Abbess B. often pointed out that she does not resemble ordinary women (similar to Ms Hui and Shi De), and that she is a *Dazhangfu*. Despite her de-gendered appraisal of the *Dazhangfu* in the above section, later during the interview, she elaborated on the *Dazhangfu* in a way that leaves no doubt vis-à-vis its inherent masculinity. Furthermore, many disciples considered her a *Dazhangfu* and stressed her masculinity:

> Ms Yü: "Your eyebrows are very bushy, but you still look like a woman. Not like our master. She's dignified, really like a man."
> Q: "Why dignified?"

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[14] Interview, 16.01.2003.

[15] Abbess B. pointed out that the BAROC has repeatedly threatened her because of her "unruly" behavior and ignoring of rules. Abbess A., by contrast, is the abbess of a prestigious institution in Taiwan. Although Abbess B. might have more disciples (I am unsure as to who has more lay disciples), only one teaching during the ordination period indoctrinated more than 400 nuns, who, in turn will pass on those beliefs and practices.

> Ms Yü: "It's beautiful to look like a man. Not like you."
> Q: "Why should anybody want to look like a man?"
> Ms Yü: "Well, just like a *Dazhangfu*. That's truly dignified."
> Q: "Why do you think this about your master?"
> Ms Yü: "Just look at her, she has no feminine features, from the distance you can't tell whether she's a woman or a man. She talks and acts like a man. You, by contrast, sound like a woman."[16]

A (female) *Dazhangfu* not only looks and acts like a man. She also sounds masculine. One beautiful spring day, Abbess B. invited me for a walk, discussing the suffering and difficulty of being an abbess. On our way back, she suddenly stopped and chanted loudly. "Hear that, my voice is not like a woman's anymore", she said.

Visible physical and mental aspects alone do not distinguish women as *Dazhangfu*. Masculinity of the voice is also required. This brief incident reminded me of a circle of Taiwanese Buddhist friends, who, in 1999, recited *mantras* on the rooftop of a University in a competition centering on the deepest intonation. The person with the deepest voice was considered the best. Masculinity thus pervades *every* aspect of being a good practitioner, from the cessation of menstruation to a low-pitched intonation, from the body to the mind, from action to non-action. A true *Dazhangfu* is masculine in every respect. Similarly to Ms Yü, Mr and Ms Da enthusiastically exclaimed in relation to a particular nun:

> Mr Da: "You should have seen her. She was really a *Dazhangfu*. She said that after she had prostrated for the length of the *Fanwangjing*, which took her more than three years to complete, her body had totally changed. Gosh, the moment we saw her, we thought that she was a man. Really, she looked more male than a man. A real *Dazhangfu*."
> Q: "So, what made her different?"
> Mr Da and wife: "Don't know. Her whole deportment. Her physical body. She just didn't look like a woman anymore."
> Q: "Do you know of similar transformations of Taiwanese monks?"
> Mr Da: "No."[17]

In this brief excerpt of a conversation that focused on menstrual taboos and traditional practices, both respondents, an academic couple in their early thirties, described

[16] Conversation, 17.01.2003, Ms Yü was the only one who ever commented on my not being *zhuangyan* because of feminine features (I was quite skinny then).
[17] Conversation, Kaohsiung, 03.11.2002.

the appearance of a particular nun as that of a *Dazhangfu*, which was *expressis verbis* depicted as hyper-masculine, "more male than a man". The respondents, and the nun herself, as they pointed out, saw her "remarkable" appearance as closely entwined with her religious practice. Since both were ostensibly impressed by her, and because the male informant in particular linked her appearance to her presumed spiritual prowess, it can be deduced that Buddhists in Taiwan consider physical appearance as a reflection of spiritual prowess. Moreover, such prowess is essentially masculine.

The importance of prostrations for the transformation into a *Dazhangfu* was also noted by other interlocutors. Abbess B., for instance, stated that one only becomes a *Dazhangfu* through prostrations.[18] Hence at least three interlocutors recognized physical exercise as an integral part of the transformation from a woman into a *Dazhangfu*. Through prostrations, the physical body obviously changes significantly – shoulders and arms become much stronger. The connection of prostrations and the *Dazhangfu* ideal thus bespeaks of corporeal masculinization. Thus, not mere mental and vocal masculinity, but particularly physical masculinity, characterizes the *Dazhangfu*.

The ordination period provided even more conclusive evidence for the aspired physical masculinity of nuns. The Western nuns were habitually praised on account of their "masculinity". We had to stand in the first row because we were the tallest, thus we had to stand in the row right behind the shortest monks. In particular the more corpulent nuns were deemed the most *zhuangyan*. Height and weight were unmistakably considered essential attributes of being *zhuangyan* – a very pleasant surprise for the Western nuns, but also for being masculine – a rather unpleasant surprise for them.[19] Masculinity and corpulence were in this way strongly connected. A photo of the ordaining masters and instructors would

[18] Interview, 16.01.2003.
[19] I often served as their translator.

reveal how gender can appear obliterated through body mass (yet I refrain from including such a photo to protect my interlocutors).

The following may explain the reason for the monastic emphasis on bulkiness (note that the ordaining master continuously encouraged us to eat a lot). During the 1950s, Chinese women "inherited an understanding of female beauty that emphasized slenderness and sleek grace above all else" (Evans, 1997: 69), which is still pervasive today (Cheng, n.d.). The bulky monastic paradigm clearly opposes this fashionable ideal. Correspondingly, interlocutors often complained whenever I had lost weight because I looked too "feminine" to them. Furthermore, Dr Shu and other interlocutors claimed that Guanyin, even when represented with a feminine face, physically appears bulky, or masculine, in the form of a *Dazhangfu*. It follows that practitioners aspire to masculinity, as historical and imagined spiritual role models are male (and thus masculine). Even if they are androgynous, as in some representations of Guanyin, their "androgyny" remains marked by masculinity.

A Feminine Dazhangfu?

According to Connell (1987: 80), sustaining "patriarchal power on the large scale requires the construction of a hypermasculine ideal of toughness and dominance." The *Dazhangfu* might be such an ideal, especially when embodied by women, to sustain male authority. While in Daoist spiritual cultivation, male bodies also feminize (Furth, 1988: 11), male Buddhist bodies remain masculine: "Perhaps it would then not be fair to ask why the abandonment of ordinary life for a man is not symbolized by the reverse sex change" (Faure, 2003: 103). The assumption that women resemble men as they advance in spiritual practice, but that the same is not proclaimed vis-à-vis men exposes how the *Dazhangfu* ideal in Taiwan is not saturated by androgyny, but by masculinity.

The unmarked masculinity of monks during the ordination period was, for example,

not seen as a positive sign. Shi Chang frowned when I pointed to the feminine looks of one of the instructors: "He's a wimp." Just as Ms and Mr Da had never heard of Taiwanese monks becoming feminine through spiritual practice, Shi Chang did not deem femininity in monks appealing. Hence, feminization is not considered an ideal for monks.

> Q: "What I would like to ask you: some people claim that in Chinese Buddhism, whatever practice one does, one resembles more and more the respective ideal or Bodhisattva, for example Guanyin."
> Ms. Yü: "But that is not to say that Guanyin is ..."
> Shi Wu: "Female. Didn't I raise this issue before? Guanyin is a man who appears to liberate [beings]."
> Q: "So, do men emasculate?"
> Ms. Yü: "No, I don't think so."
> Shi Wu: "Men, if they are not practitioners, their habitual patterns...for example if they were female in their last life, I dare to say that I've seen this, then they resemble women even more than a woman, I've seen this."
> Q: "How about their progress in spiritual practice?"
> Shi Wu: "They gradually diminish their habitual patterns."[20]

While the progressively good practice of a woman entails the transformation of physical appearance, Shi Wu assessed a man's progress is primarily assessed on the basis of mental and spiritual factors. Men are only feminine because they were women in their past life, or because they emasculate due to sickness.

A short story by Ling Mengchu evidences how the feminization of monks was definitely not considered a characteristic of spiritual eminence: "A *feminine* looking monk disguises himself as a nun and takes residence at the Good Works Nunnery. Not only does the monk dress like a woman, but he also has the *physical ability to withdraw his sexual organ inside of himself*, thereby nearly replicating in physiology his adopted gender" – he does so in order to have sexual intercourse with the nuns (Goldman, 2001: 71; emphasis mine). Although only a story, and although Goldman claims the clergy to have been subject to much parody, this story nonetheless indicates the feminization of monks as not merely a

[20] Interview, 11.01.2003.

sign of (moral) inferiority, but as a threat.[21] Correspondingly, Dr Shu, cited in Chapter Six, emphasized that there is *absolutely* no need for men to transform as they already are male:

> Q: "So how about men. Is there a similar phenomenon in men?"
> Dr Shu: "Men ...I don't think that men have to practice to become women. Men are [already] men."
> Q: "But they are not..."
> Dr Shu: "Do you mean: they don't have desire?"
> Q: "I mean that they attain the stage of the non-differentiation between male and female [i.e. androgyny]."
> Dr Shu: "Ah, I think that's impossible, unless they have physiological problems. If a man has physiological problems, he doesn't look like a man."
> E: "But there are also other practices that apply to men as well as women, his practice..."[22]

While women may resemble men with increased levels of practice, like all other interlocutors, Dr Shu unambiguously pronounced the same not to apply to men. They already are masculine and conform to the norm.

"Bodies take metaphors seriously", the phrase is Moore's (1994: 71). The masculinity of the Buddha's body is a spiritual metaphor which contemporary Buddhist bodies, male and female alike "take seriously" – so seriously that androgyny is ruled out. "Buddhists knew that Buddhas were in some sense beyond gender, yet they said repeatedly that a male body represented it best" (Levering, 1997: 137). And so, Dr Shu stated the necessity of masculinity as deriving from the male embodiment of the Buddha.

> Dr Shu: "Why should the Buddha have been androgynous? He was very clearly male. He produced a son! After attaining awakening whether he was neither male nor female?"
> Q: "One of the signs of a fully enlightened one is a sheathed penis, which has been interpreted as a sign of his asexuality."
> Dr Shu: "Like a ... that he can't use his sexual organ?"
> Q: "He doesn't need it."
> Abbess B.: "I think you say this because of your Chinese language limitations. I think there's no such thing in the sūtras, that he surpassed the ordinary distinction of male

[21] This story is also significant for questions discussed in Chapter Six. Firstly, it shows that sexual reversal was known to the general public. Ideas of ascetic physical transformation might therefore not have been an esoteric practice. On the contrary, this parody might reflect an ascetic obsession with sexual reversal, an issue Goldman does not contemplate.

[22] Interview, 26.12.2002.

> and female... [or that] he changed from his former human form to that of a Buddha. ... What Dr Shu said about the child. True, he did produce a son before he left home. However, after he had left for the homeless life, he was still a male. He was still a proper male ...I doubt that after he had attained Buddhahood, that he was no longer the prince of the Sakya clan, the guy who had fathered a child. After he attained Buddhahood, he still spoke the way ordinary males do. Only his humanity had been fulfilled... [We] cannot say that after he attained Buddhahood he was no longer the Sakyamuni who had produced a child."
> Q: "So ... didn't he become neither female nor male [i.e. androgynous]?"
> Dr Shu: "I think physiologically he was the same as before."[23]

Abbess B. and Dr. Shu did not consider the Buddha androgynous. While the Buddha's sheathed sex organ has been interpreted as a sign of asexuality, or even androgyny, Buddhists in Taiwan, as the interview above unmistakably demonstrates, emphasize the historical Buddha to have been a man who remained masculine after his awakening. The argument that the Buddha was beyond corporeality, or neither male nor female (androgynous) was interpreted as a sign of my lack of fluency in Chinese.

"The hieratic posture of the practitioner is modeled after the 'majestic attitude' of the Buddha" (Faure, 1995: 212). Since the Buddha was male, the ideal of spiritual practice in Taiwan is essentially male, or, as a compromise, masculine, since "there is no denying that Buddhist scriptures valorize masculinity. For one thing, the body of the Buddha is always described as a male one" (Faure, 2003: 104).

My data describes femininity not as a spiritual ideal except in relation to the secular sphere, as Chapter Three amply demonstrated. Conversely, Murcott (1991: 119) argues, "the tension between the Buddhist renunciant and the sensuous female is transcended by the negation of the feminine aspect". Is it thus the fear of women that inspires the obsession with masculinity?

> Q: "You said today that your master looks like a man."
> Ms Yü: "That's right. She has reached the level of having transformed into a man. Like her master, she had also transformed into a man [through] practice."
> Q: "Accordingly, women become like men?"

[23] Interview, 26.12.2002.

Ms Yü: "I think that's right."
Q: "I feel there's a contradiction here, for Guanyin is female."
Ms Yü: "That's only the appearance."
Q: "Then why do women have to transform into men?"
Ms Yü: "Because males ... I feel because the Buddha seems to have been [male]... that's my own opinion... I think that men probably don't engage in as many evil deeds..."[24]

The historical Buddha is *the* spiritual paradigm: Because he was male, if women aim at attaining awakening, their femininity has to be repressed. The only female role model previously assumed to be aspired to by Buddhists, is stripped of her popular religious femininity. Because no ultimate female spiritual role model exists, women aspire to masculine ideals: "The Buddhist *Golden Legend* [...] is essentially masculine" (Faure, 2003: 8). As good practitioners, women have to transform; they have to become masculine.

Q: "Have you heard about the *Dazhangfu*?"
B: "*Dazhangfu*?"
C: "The meaning of *Dazhangfu* and 大男人主義 (B), is she asking about the *Dazhangfu* or the B?"
B: "The *Dazhangfu* comprises B."
Q: "When you hear the term *Dazhangfu*, what kind of person do you think of?"
C: "I think a *Dazhangfu*, no matter what, can do anything."
B: "[A *Dazhangfu* is] someone who is daring and courageous."
Q: "What else?"
B: "As I just said, B."
Q: "If I tell you that I have met a master who is a real *Dazhangfu*, does a male or female person come to mind?"
B: "Definitely a male person."
Q: "So how about a female *Dazhangfu*, what is the difference between her and a male *Dazhangfu*?"
C: "Is there a difference? There shouldn't be [any difference]."
[...]
Q: "If a woman is a very good practitioner, does she progressively look like a man?"
A: "Her ambition would."
B: "Should be [the case]."
Q: "In what respect?"
B: "Outside, she is dignified (*zhuangyan*)."
Q: "Is this dignity masculine?"
B: "Not necessarily."
C: "Measured (reticent)."
B: "What I just quoted was from the *Long Amitābha Sūtra*, where women are reborn as men in the Western paradise."

[24] Interview, 11.01.2003.

Q: "What do you think about that?"
B: "What I think about it? One probably has to reach a certain level of practice, only then can one have that... haven't seen it..."[25]

This interview illustrates the masculinity of the *Dazhangfu*. When thinking about a *Dazhangfu*, a male person comes to mind. According to interlocutor B, the *Dazhangfu* comprises 大男人主義, literally "Great Man/Male-ism", perhaps best translated as "androcentrism". Hence a *Dazhangfu* is male; s/he is measured, courageous, daring and dignified. This elevated stage, women reach at a certain level in their respective practice through thorough masculinization of body, voice and mind.

Respondent B explained the importance of male (re)birth in the context of the *Long Sukhavātī Sūtra*, which claims only men to be reborn in *Sukhavātī*, the Pure Land of Amitabhā. As argued elsewhere (Yeshe, 2003b), this sūtra must be considered significant in shaping gendered attitudes in Buddhism, an argument that is compellingly supported by her statement and data discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. Is the transformation into men above all a directive for Pure Land Buddhists? "Pure Land was, of all the schools of Chinese Buddhism, the most empathic in its insistence that a woman cannot take her body to the West" (Grant, 1994: 76). Thus, the aversion toward female embodiment signaled in the *Long Sukhavātī Sūtra*, promoted due to the pervasiveness of Pure Land Buddhism, might have shaped the aspiration to masculinity of female Buddhists.

As noted before, the interlocutors quoted above appeared to be very self-confident women. When I questioned them about menstruation taboos and pollution beliefs, their answers clearly diverged from traditional views. However, when discussing the *Dazhangfu*, their attitudes did not differ significantly from those of other interlocutors. Hence, the masculine *Dazhangfu* might be a generally accepted ideal. The implication of this data is self-evident: Women masculinize while men are already proximate to the normative model.

[25] Interview, 17.01.2003.

Peach (2002: 68-69) suggests apropos the *Lotus Sūtra* "when the transformation takes place, sex is eliminated by making the female into a non-sexual male [...this] denigrates females as more worldly while elevating males as more spiritual."

Similarly to the above interlocutors, Ms Wen was a self-confident woman who, throughout the interview, did not adhere to traditional injunctions vis-à-vis menstruation. Yet when it came to the *Dazhangfu*, her views were fairly consistent with the interpretation of other interlocutors. She first described the *Dazhangfu* as masculine, but then changed her mind and (like Shi Wu) claimed the *Dazhangfu* to be androgynous. Nevertheless, their characterization of androgyny Can be taken to rather approximate an androcentric ideal.

> Q: "Do you think that if a woman is a good practitioner, she resembles more and more an ordinary man?"
> Ms Wen: "I think provided that you're good at practice, it's certainly [true] ...I also can ascertain..."
> Q: "Sorry?"
> Ms Wen: "It is certain that if you're a good practitioner you become a *Dazhangfu*, you become a man ... I can say for sure that that's the case."
> Q: "So is your point of view that a *Dazhangfu* is masculine?"
> Ms Wen: "Maybe one could say androgynous."
> Q: "So how about a male *Dazhangfu*, does he become feminine?"
> Ms Wen: "No."
> Q: "Why, could you describe a *Dazhangfu*?"
> Ms Wen: "...the mind of a *Dazhangfu* has a vast ambition. S/he is patient. S/he does things using wisdom, and does not get swayed by emotions."
> Q: "Hence emotions or..."
> Ms Wen: "A *Dazhangfu* has to have wisdom."
> Q: "How about the outer appearance?"
> Ms Wen: "...as for the outer appearance, there is probably no distinction, other than that of being huge, like statues... A dignified statue of the Buddha has certain requirements ... the same probably applies to the *Dazhangfu*..."
> Q: "How about female *Dazhangfu*?"
> Ms Wen: "I think there is probably also a similar [set of] requirements, that is to say, she can do more than average women. Her capacity for aspirations is greater and when she does things she can contemplate with wisdom."
> Q: "How about her looks?"
> Ms Wen: "She presumably becomes relatively strong, but the outer appearance of some people is so soft. Her mind is vast and understanding. Her capacity to make aspirations is very great, so not necessarily."[26]

[26] Interview, 16.01.2003.

Ms Wen also does not consider men to feminize when they become *Dazhangfu*. While many of the attributes Ms Wen ascribes to the *Dazhangfu* can be considered gender-neutral, such as wisdom, she only considers a female *Dazhangfu* capable of "making great aspirations". A *Dazhangfu* does not get swayed by emotions, a statement echoing similar ideas of the eighteenth century: "only the most virile of women are able to uproot their emotional attachments in the manner of *Dazhangfu*" (Grant, 1994: 78). Further, Ms Wen explicitly depicts a *Dazhangfu* as dignified (*zhuangyan*), and this dignity, so often mentioned in conversations, parallels the requirements for good statues. These are plainly masculine.

The ideal female *Dazhangfu* is the same as the male one. This evidences how female practitioners, provided they're good at practice, are conceived to masculinize. The views of the interlocutors quoted above illustrate how female practitioners are portrayed as becoming more androgynous, that is, they masculinize. Male practitioners, by contrast, are not considered to feminize in a corresponding way.

Hence this data evidences the *Dazhangfu* as rather constructed by androcentrism than androgyny. This mirrors Chinese attitudes of gender reversal. While the transition of female to male was seen as unproblematic, the sex change of male to female was regarded with suspicion (Furth, 1988) – the very cultural valence underlying gender transformation in Taiwanese Buddhism today. Correspondingly, the aim of spiritual cultivation, liberation, is achieved by a transformation towards masculinity, a view proclaimed in some Buddhist sūtras and contemporary practice, a phenomenon that is corroborated by the following statement: "in Buddhahood, the male form is retained: the male body represents perfection of the mind" (Humes, 1993: 135) while female embodiment signifies mental imperfection.

> Q: "So, can *bhiksunīs* attain Buddhahood?"
> Shi Wu: "According to sūtras, a bhiksuni cannot become a Buddha. She can attain liberation and Arhatship, but as for Buddhahood, in accordance with sūtras – and that's not me speaking here, women first have to transform into a male body. Even though you perceive Guanyin as being in a female body, Guanyin is originally still a

Dazhangfu..."
Q: "What form does a *Dazhangfu* take?"
Shi Wu: "[A *Dazhangfu*] doesn't have those habitual patterns, like greed, hatred, ignorance, doubt, pride... because in most of us women there is much arrogance and doubt."
Q: "How about men?"
Shi Wu: "As for men, they have relatively little. That is not to say that they don't have [defilements]. There are also men who have female manners. It exists, but that's not quite right. Hence there are people who say 'female man' which means that you're in a female form, but that your behavior is that of a *Dazhangfu*. Thus it said: the Buddha was androgynous, neither male nor female, rather, androgynous..."
Q: "Do you believe what you've just said?"
Shi Wu: "I do, because I can find it in the scriptures."[27]

Contrary to Abbess B. and Dr Shu, Shi Wu considered the Buddha androgynous, but in the same way as Dr. Shu, she deemed men with female traits to contravene the norm. She clearly indicated that women have to transform into a male body to attain Buddhahood, a view held by several other interlocutors. Women are by nature more defiled than men, being the main reason for their required transformation. Furthermore, Shi Wu deems Guanyin masculine. Accordingly, because Buddhist role models are fundamentally male, or masculine, women are required to masculinize in their spiritual practice, by transcending or overcoming attachment to secular femininity. But a *Dazhangfu* is not only physical masculinity. S/he is also free from negative habitual patterns, of which Shi Wu considered doubt and arrogance as especially strong among women. Her interview demonstrates how Buddhists justify their beliefs by relying on their understanding, and interpretation of religious texts.[28] This legitimation through texts is another indication of the important connection of text, belief and practice.

Interlocutors indicated less frequently that accomplished male practitioners become

[27] Interview, 11.01.2003.
[28] Whenever I asked for the exact scriptural evidence for interlocutors' arguments, *all* responded by saying "look it up in ... scripture", rather than quoting the exact passage, or showing me the excerpt, despite the fact that the scriptures were often at hand. Although one might argue that this suggests interlocutors did not know where exactly their knowledge stemmed from, it has to be emphasized that they referred me to specific scriptures, so they knew the scriptural context of the respective statements, but not necessarily the exact passage. Therefore, maybe they refused to locate the precise passage not due to a lack of knowledge, but due to insufficient interest.

compassionate and so forth: Still, several respondents singled out compassion, gentleness and careful thinking as advantages of being a woman for spiritual practice. Interestingly, during the Song dynasty, Ven. Dahui characterized the mind of the *Dazhangfu* as a stage that, once attained, has to be developed by giving rise to compassion (Levering, 1992: 143).

Whilst the image of the *Dazhangfu* is prevalent in Taiwanese Buddhism, not a single interlocutor referred to the need to engendering compassion, or to himself, or male teachers as *Laopo* 老婆 "old woman/hag", a term Hsieh (1981: 172) believes to have been applied to male teachers since the Song dynasty, praising their "compassionate and unselfish efforts", their patience, kindness and enthusiasm. Faure (1995: 245), by contrast, maintains that the literary motif "old woman" signals a woman who was no longer feminine, who had lost her femininity. Hence, her status was higher than before, an argument corroborated by empirical data in Wolf (1972), where post-menopausal women attain a significantly higher status in their respective communities. And so, interlocutors praised female masters as *Dazhangfu*, and male masters as being very kind and compassionate, but *not* as *Laopo*. *Laopo*, in contemporary Chinese in Taiwan, seems to have a rather negative connotation when used for strangers, unless employed as a euphemism among the younger generation for their girlfriend or wife. Abbess B., with respect to the term *Laopo* in relation to Chan masters, said that she had never heard of it before. Neither had other interlocutors.

Like Shi Wu, Dr Shu contended the characteristics of a good male practitioner not to be physical, but mental. An abbot, he thought, cares for his disciples as if they were his children.[29] Such attributes are often interpreted as feminine, but they are in fact asexual. As stated in Chapter Three, compassion, effort, patience and so on are part of the six *Pāramitās*, which have to be developed by *every* practitioner of Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to Grant, the rhetoric of the *Dazhangfu* did not automatically obliterate feminine traits in the

[29] Interview, 27.12.2002.

historical female *Dazhangfu*, for even nuns had to embrace traditional roles within the family, such as caring for their parents and so on. She writes, "ultimately, what is most significant is that expressions of what might be called traditional feminine roles coexist with activities traditionally considered masculine" (Grant, 1996: 74). De Vido (2000) claims the same about contemporary nuns. Even so, while these arguments might well apply to *activities*, they do not fully apply to appearance, mental traits, or spiritual prowess. No interlocutor referred to compassion, kindness and care as specifically female or feminine qualities, although several respondents to the questionnaire and interlocutors considered women more compassionate than men.

It might be argued that the concept *Dazhangfu* is not gender-linked, that a person of great spiritual potential is beyond gender and has transcended notions of femininity and masculinity. Still, androgyny is the total collapsing of the gender distinction of both sexes, so the same would have to apply to men, if the *Dazhangfu* ideal in Taiwan was truly androgynous. Yet the image of spiritually advanced men differs insignificantly from worldly masculinity.

> Shi Wu: "When you look into a woman's face you can tell that she is a female, unless you've practiced up to [the level of] resembling a man... like [our master]. The moment you look at her, she resembles a man, she has already reached [the level of] androgyny."
> Q: "How about if a man practices [to the level of] androgyny?"
> Shi Wu: "[...] You should have a look at Master Xing Yün's photo, because you have to [assess this] on account of appearance and character. For example, if you look at him, he neither appears as male nor female. Women have that womanly/feminine sense/flavor to them... as for an androgynous person, s/he gives worldly people the impression of neither looking masculine nor feminine, for men are rather rough ..., because they have male hormones.... Since they have female hormones, women speak daintily, shrill... But if you look at ordinary males, their voice is fairly crude, deep... therefore we can say that our master has already... she probably was a man in her previous life, hence she doesn't have those feminine ... Moreover, her voice is very rough, very deep [...] When we hear [such a person] reciting sūtras or chanting, the whole body feels comfortable."[30]

[30] Interview, 11.01.2003.

Shi Wu was the only interlocutor who repeatedly raised the issue of androgyny: Nevertheless, the interview above confirms that what she considers androgyny is in fact androcentrism. She described Master Xing Yün as androgynous. The reader may decide whether Master Xing Yün should be considered androgynous.

Photo 2: Master Xing Yün[31]

Shi Wu believed that Abbess B. must have been a man in her previous life because she does not look feminine. She first characterized the voice of women as shrill and those of men as deep, or rough. After having claimed that Abbess B. must have reached the stage of androgyny, she used the same terms to describe the voice of the abbess as she used for ordinary men. Nonetheless, she then explicated this particular kind of vocal potential to emerge from the fact that hearing it produces a comfortable feeling throughout the body. Elsewhere in the interview, she referred to one man who, although having a deep voice, still sounded shrill. Hence not all men are graced with a naturally deep and rough tone of voice. Even so, she used the same adjectives in her portrayal of "comfortable" as she did for masculine voices. Her statement therefore affirms androcentrism, and not androgyny to be the ideal.

> Q: "My question is not whether men transform into women, but whether they emasculate."
> B: "They probably resemble more and more a masculine form."
> Q: "So a man becomes more and more like a man?"
> B: "*Zhuangyan* – that [kind of] form."
> Q: "Not progressively feminine?"
> B: "Women have to become like men, or…"
> Q: "I don't know because she said that Guanyin… isn't Guanyin female?"
> B: "Guanyin is not female. Rather, Guanyin appears in whatever form is required."
> Q: "What do you think?"

[31] www.foguangshan.org/main.htm, no date [Accessed: Sep. 2003].

A: "I don't consider form important."[32]

This interview illustrates *zhuangyan* as essentially masculine. After the interview, the three respondents strongly affirmed *zhuangyan* to be thoroughly masculine. Men do not emasculate. Similar to women, they have to masculinize in a certain way, incorporating a specific, ascetic masculinity. When questioned about the possibility of the feminization of men, respondent A pointed out that form is not important. Only one other interlocutor argued in this way concerning the transformation of female practitioners. According to these three interlocutors, a good practitioner does not giggle but smiles, is compassionate, wise, has perfected the six *Pāramitās*, and, most importantly, is *zhuangyan*.

To summarize, the masculine *Dazhangfu* as *the* emblem of a good practitioner in contemporary practice encompasses physical, mental, vocal and performative traits. It thus emerges that ascetic masculinity – not androgyny – presents the standard in spiritual cultivation. "Religious beliefs are embodied through religious practice" (Coakley, 1997: 8, quoting Kasulis). Correspondingly, the aspired masculinization evident in the *Dazhangfu* ideal bespeaks of the conviction in the necessity of masculinity for the attainment of Buddhahood. All interlocutors portrayed the *Dazhangfu* as tall, big, and as resembling statues of the Buddha. These are, very plainly, ordinary masculine physical characteristics taken to an ideal of religious perfection. An androgynous, or feminine ideal for men would appear quite differently. In summary, then:

> The problem arises from the fact that, in the contrast between man and woman, the former is seen as closer to the goal of genderlessness (androgyny); for all practical (and spiritual reasons), he is *less* gendered, and in a sense already *beyond* gender (Faure, 2003: 105).

[32] Interview, 17.01.2003. Most interviews where I enquired about the gender of Guanyin asserted Guanyin to be sex, or genderless, mostly invoking the "Pumenpin" of the *Lotus*, which depicts Guanyin as manifesting in any required form.

The Dazhangfu, a "Wen-Wu Paradigm"?

Is the (monastic) gender-free ideal truly genderless? Monastics, men and women alike, conform mentally and physically to an ideal which differs significantly from secular feminine and masculine paradigms. However, while the differences between male and female seem diminished through similar clothing and shaven heads (Chern, 2000: 304), monastic rules and social practices still inscribe sexual difference (as Chapters Two and Four demonstrated). Furthermore, even though ordained men and women have to break with social norms and aim at becoming *Dazhangfu*, the transformation of women into *Dazhangfu* is far more dramatic than those of men. A male *Dazhangfu* is by no means an ordinary man. Nonetheless, as the interviews – in particular with Abbess B. – establish, the ideal of the *Dazhangfu* is much closer to conventional masculinity than femininity.[33]

While traditionally, celibate masculinity was classified under the category "good fellow", the data presented in this chapter rather establishes the *Dazhangfu* to be closer to the traditional Chinese masculine *wen-wu* 文武 paradigm, as analyzed by Louie.[34] In the context of gendered identities, *wen* referred to "literary excellence, civilized behavior and education", whereas *wu* implied a "powerful physique, fearlessness and fighting skills" (Louie, 2002: 161). Physically, *wu* in particular implied height, and Louie argues that, "size of a measure of power and manliness seems to be universal and needs little elaboration." Further, *wu* implied arrogance and pride (Louie, 2002: 27). However, in the gendered *wen-wu* paradigm,

[33] Hsieh argues: "a female practitioner of great courage and strong resolution was no doubt called a *Zhangfu*, but she was *only called so* when *compared* to other *female practitioners*" (Hsieh, 1981: 161; emphasis mine). Current data does not provide sufficient ground to confirm or refute her argument.

[34] *Wen* has traditionally been translated as civil, and *wu* as martial. They were principles applied to statecraft, a domain reserved for men in Ancient China. The recently excavated *Huang-Lao Boshu* 黃老帛書, for instance, present *wen* as a positive with culture connected life-giving force, and *wu* as a comparatively negative force that is linked to martiality and death. Yet both were regarded as necessary principle for the consistent functioning of a state. *Wen* and *wu* are thus of equally important status; both can only serve the purpose of governing a state adequately if their application is safeguarded at the appropriate time (Turner, 1989: 70). This paradigm also underlies the construction of *wen-wu* in the context of hegemonic masculinity. For a discussion of *wen-wu* in Classical Chinese philosophy, see Creel, 1970.

both had to be balanced – similar to *Yin* and *Yang*. Since a *wen-wu* man was able to exert self-control, he was not swayed by emotions. He was therefore a "spiritual and moral guide to society". As such, the *wen-wu* ideal served as a paradigm for male leaders throughout Chinese history (Louie, 2002: 17, 24, 44-45, 50ff).

The *wen-wu* characteristics are all evocative of the *Dazhangfu* ideal. A *Dazhangfu* appears to be above all a *wen-wu* person. Hence one may ask: "Is the *Dazhangfu* a Buddhist, or a Chinese ideal?" Does this question beg an answer?

The *wen-wu* paradigm *only* applied to men, *unless* women "transformed into men". Then, "the woman's *wen* or *wu* achievements are acknowledged only if they *publicly* demonstrate that they are men. As cultural constructs, *wen* and *wu* realms are the public preserve of men, and women who dare to venture in must do so in a manner which will further prove the exclusivity of male rights implicit in this construct" (Louie, 2002: 11-12). Moreover, as Louie, argues, the espousal of the *wen-wu* paradigm by women did not subvert gender identities, but reinscribed the superiority of masculinity (Ibid.).

The (female) *Dazhangfu* fully corresponds to the image of a *wen-wu* person. This demonstrates how broader societal gender identities shape those of the religious sphere. They cannot be considered as independent from each other. Instead, they mutually enforce each other – they are thoroughly connected.

Contemplating the Dazhangfu

Table 5: The contemporary *Dazhangfu*

Mind	**Body/Performance**
Tolerance	Masculine voice
Morality	Masculine appearance
Mind to benefit others	(Spiritual amenorrhea)
Optimistic	Demeanor
Positive	Dignity
Daring	Masculine features
Selflessness	Masculine action
Vast ambition	Strength
Can do anything	Huge (body)
Courageous	Not laughing
Reticent	Like Buddhist statues
Lack of defilements	大男人主義
Uses wisdom	
Does not follow emotions	
Seriousness	
Great capacity to make aspirations	

This table lists the characteristics of the *Dazhangfu* as evoked in interviews. A comparison with the table on page 221 shows that many of the mental characteristics ascribed to the *Dazhangfu* during the Song dynasty remain widespread today. However, in contrast to the *Dazhangfu* of the Song dynasty, interlocutors today also assess the *Dazhangfu* through physical appearance and vocal resonance. Therefore, the comparison of contemporary and historical traits confirms the persistence of traditional interpretations in contemporary Buddhist discourse. Still, the concept of the *Dazhangfu* appears to have somewhat changed, being presently far more determined by appearance and performance than during the Song dynasty. The empirical data presented here depicts the *Dazhangfu* as masculine, and ***not*** as androgynous, for a *Dazhangfu* is a masculine 'Great Man' in body, voice, performance and mind: a masculine image comes to mind when the *Dazhangfu* is invoked.

Yet, the *Dazhangfu* as a spiritual or religious ideal is apparently mainly appealing to the

clergy. In another context, Faure (2003: 13) contends, "their entry into the sangha, their emulation of a masculine soteriological model centered on the mind, marks the forgetting of their sexual difference, of their "feminine" spirituality [...] In practice, however, spiritualization usually means masculinization (and euphemization)." Yet Hsieh (1981: 162-3) assumes female teachers such as Miaodao to have understood the *Dazhangfu* as gender-neutral. Others have proven the contrary. Levering (1992: 151), for instance, has argued persuasively that androcentrism saturates the appraisal of the *Dazhangfu.*

Almost two-thirds of the respondents to the questionnaire (71%) affirmed that good female practitioners increasingly resemble men. Interestingly though, significantly less male than female respondents replied so, suggesting it to be an aspiration more strongly emphasized by women than by men. Perhaps men don't reify the importance of masculinity as strongly as women. Nevertheless, only a few respondents and interlocutors, male or female, expressly opposed the belief in the masculinization of women practitioners.

It matters less whether a few outspoken individuals disagree, or interpret a term in a non-gendered way, or whether a large number of practitioners do. Only Abbess B. vociferously rejected the current interpretation of the physical transformation of women into men. But her rebellion also demonstrates the predominance of traditional views. Yet among my interlocutors, she was alone in her opposition, and only opposed this belief in an audience of exclusively female monastics (without a recorder). She offered an almost diametrically opposed interpretation during the recorded interview and in everyday performance. Either, she performed the critical judgment during our first meeting to create rapport with us (she asked us for help regarding certain projects), or she gave different answers during the recorded interview and in the group interview because of questions of confidentiality and monastic protocol. The first interpretation seems more realistic, considering that she used similar techniques of creating rapport with other people, too (as

observed in the section on *shentong*). Furthermore, she adhered strongly to the masculine *Dazhangfu* ideal in her everyday life, which might have been a performance for her Taiwanese disciples and supporters. And so, the only critical assessment of the masculine *Dazhangfu* must again be understood in its particular context.

When I had almost completed this analysis of the *Dazhangfu*, I discovered a paper by Paul that would have helped much had I discovered it before the fieldwork in Taiwan:

> A woman may not need to defer her religious goal until another lifetime as a male. The literary motif of sexual transformation is accomplished in this lifetime – by eradicating her sexual identity. The female is seen as a male – that is, perfect and pure. [...] If the mental and moral powers no longer hold old karmic patterns of behavior, the limitations of the female body are negated. [...] The implication is that through meditation and discipline, the female sexuality of the body has been destroyed along with its past karma. [...] The woman as a Bodhisattva has a masculine mind – that is, religious mind – in a body that is no longer subject to sexual desire. *Such a body is <u>really</u> no longer female, although it still <u>looks</u> female* (Paul, 1981: 65; emphasis mine).

In Buddhism in Taiwan, such a body is essentially masculine. It looks male. It sounds male. It acts male, and, as Chapter Six evidenced, such a body even stops menstruating due to eradicating femininity and desire, and establishing control over the body. Paul's statement lucidly explains why Buddhist women are required to transform into men, and how they accomplish this goal. Interestingly, several interlocutors provided similar explanations for female masculinization.

The data presented here confirms the endurance of traits celebrated in historical texts in contemporary Buddhist practice in Taiwan. That women transform their femininity to attain a higher stage of spiritual practice echoes sutric views. But such views only gain resonance if they are embedded in the contemporary sphere. Correspondingly, "the removal of sexuality – or becoming religious – was to be no longer female but to become male" (Paul, 1981: 69) today as in the past, in contemporary practice as much as in literary allegories. Hitherto, scholars have almost overlooked the endurance and pervasiveness of this view. The *Dazhangfu* remains a thriving force today. It is not a literary motif of the past.

Instead, it remains the role model for ordained women and men – primarily because the historical Buddha was male. In this way, the positive appraisal of masculinity, hence androcentrism, pervades many aspects of Buddhism in Taiwan. The *Dazhangfu* may be the most essential of a set of practices that encourage masculinity and simultaneously entail the repression, even suppression of femininity.

The *Dazhangfu* illustrates performance to be more important in the determination of gender than essential attributes: "In such models, physical characteristics are the *sign* or *effect* of sexual *difference* rather than the *cause* of gender identity. It is for this reason that if you are a woman who behaves like a man then you must grow a penis" (Moore, 1994: 39). It goes without saying that I did not venture to ask my interlocutors whether a female *Dazhangfu* "grows a penis", but Abbess B. explicitly did not consider it a necessity. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the *Dazhangfu* confirms that in order to be considered a 'Great Man', one has to behave *and* look like a man, which substantiates Moore's view of bodily practice as a mode of knowledge (Moore, 1994: 71). The knowledge of the male Buddha inspires the bodily, performative and mental practice leading to the masculine *Dazhangfu*, while this very bodily practice in turn reconfirms the masculinity of the Buddha.

In a recent paper, Levering (1997: 138-140) addressed the question of how women 'coped' in the thoroughly androcentric realm of Chan monasteries. One strategy of 'coping', as this discussion illustrates, might have been their internalization of masculine ideals, norms and values, as determined by the female *Dazhangfu*. Ascertaining whether this strategy was imposed by men, or whether it was a female response to patriarchal forces might be an unfeasible, even superfluous undertaking.[35]

[35] Another means of 'coping' among monastic interlocutors was, as discussed already in Chapter Five, a subaltern subversion of gender hierarchy: One instructor, an abbess in fact, posited the eight *Gurudharmas* to have come into being because women are too strong and would simply have gained control over Buddhism had they not been limited by these rules. This method of 'coping' is based on the subaltern position of

If Abbess B. can be considered the prototype of a female *Dazhangfu*, then we might posit this ideal as succeeding to liberate some. In a culture that required the submissiveness of women, their adherence to normative behavior, and their confinement to the domestic sphere, the *Dazhangfu* could appear as a desirable option. Abbess B's disciples emphasized that she does not care about what others think or say about her. Her spontaneity and intensity, her thunderous laughter and boisterous yet "dignified" demeanor were all considered signs of her having achieved an ideal many did not even dare to dream of. The *Dazhangfu* must be a tempting ideal for women who feel constrained by mainstream ideals of femininity: "[Nuns] consciously or unconsciously resist against socio-cultural and structural control over their bodies and object to the internalization of a submissive female self-identity" (Chern, 2000: 313). But the rejected socio-cultural control is replaced by an eschatological requirement which is itself shaped by androcentrism and masculinity. The *Dazhangfu*, as part of a discourse which emphasizes masculinity, is quite possibly the reflection of – and can be regarded as contributing to – rather negative attitudes toward femininity.

> By investigating and evaluating the physical disposition inherited in the tradition, a person stimulates and refines his own sense of what is physically right and can appropriate it for himself. At the same time, his own selection and embellishment of the physical constitutes a reformation and refinement of the tradition [...] the physical disposition [...] is malleable, wax into which novelty can be pressed (Ames, 1993: 172-173).

This thesis determines Ames' statement to apply, *mutàdis mutandis*, to Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan. The normative good spiritual practitioner is essentially masculine, though s/he may be male or female. Depending on the disposition of the respective practitioners, the "female wax" can be molded into a masculine form. Since Buddhist

monastic women, a strategy that interprets the apparent subordination as a sign of actual strength. Similar arguments were specifically suggested with respect to the rule that fully ordained nuns have more precepts than monks, and that women can only be ordained once. Similarly, the conviction in the dual nature of female embodiment, either defiled or divine, still gives women within the apex of the religious and institutionalized power structure the possibility to assert their own superiority. Nevertheless, generally, only very few interlocutors – who incidentally held high positions – subverted common interpretations.

practice was first epitomized by a man – the Buddha –, Buddhists in Taiwan today still assume masculinity to characterize Buddhahood, the goal of spiritual perfection, and consequently, the level of outstanding spiritual practice.

> In the Buddhist model, man comes first and last, that is, after and before the Buddha [...] Maleness is the mandatory stage in preparation for Buddhahood – just like monks are the necessary mediator between women and the Buddha. Thus, woman is secondary in relation to man [...] (Faure, 2003: 142).

The combination of Buddhist masculine ascetic ideals, the belief that womanhood is a sign of negative karma, sexual transformation stories, and specific Buddhist and Chinese views of the body and attitudes toward femininity collectively account for the persistence of the ideal of the masculinization of female practitioners. In contrast to overt gender inequality, this was not seen as problematic by friends and interlocutors. Instead, it was a cultural construct Buddhists in Taiwan almost universally accepted.

Pittman (2001: 339 n.48), in another context, elucidates how the reformer of Chinese Buddhism Ven. Taixü encouraged women to be active in Buddhism, but nevertheless assumed that women have to transform into men if they are to attain Buddhahood. Apart from Abbess B., only the nun Guo Xiang in the documentary "Cave in the Snow" (referred to in the *Prologue*) criticized that in Taiwanese Buddhism, "it is impossible [for women] to attain Buddhahood. We have to transform into a male body to attain Buddhahood. That's strongly emphasized."[36] Ven. Guo Xiang's statement is rather challenged by Chern's hypothesis, already quoted in full in Chapter Four: "The bodily practice of Buddhist nuns shaving their heads and dressing in robes has the 'constructive' implication of gender equality. [...] Located in Chinese Confucian structure, Buddhist nuns become de-gendered" (Chern, 2000: 310, 320 respectively). Similarly, Cheng (n.d.) refers to Ven. Wu Yin, who devised new robes for her nuns because she considered the original ones to show the

[36] Thompson (Director) and Cox (Producer), 2002.

"female curve" too openly. This implies an aversion to those gender characteristics exhibited by women, and a concomitant repression of femininity. The clothing of early monastics is said to have consisted of rags – a sign of renunciation. Monastic clothing does not appear to have been aimed at concealing the gender of the monastics, for firstly, the initial clergy was male and secondly, additional rules for women's clothing after their ordination had to be devised as the monks' clothing did dot suffice to cover nuns' bodies fully (such as their breasts). The alleged and much emphasized "degenderization" of monastics – or better, nuns – seems therefore to be a culturally Chinese, if not Taiwanese pastime. It may well be that the required masculinization of female Buddhists is equally a Chinese (or Taiwanese) passion.

Ven. Guo Xiang's statement and the data presented in this chapter evidences how nuns are expected to have the same appearance as monks. Yet, monks do not totally renounce social ideals of masculinity. Men do not "de-gender" in the same way as women, as they already *are* the norm: "The *male* continues to provide the *normative standard* by which the *female* is found to be *deficient*" (Peach, 2002: 69). Women either de-gender, or de-sex in ignoring and suppressing their femininity so as to conform to an imagined ideal of ascetic masculinity, a social practice encompassing even biological processes as Chapter Six demonstrated. In short, the *Dazhangfu* appears to be a symptom of the cultivated repression of femininity in clerical Buddhism in Taiwan.

Conclusion

> Gender stereotypes only exist as long as people fail to challenge them, only as long as people persist in mistaking mere social constructs for reality (Wawrytko, 1991: 226).

As long as masculine ascetism is considered an ultimate truth rather than a social construct, as long as a challenge to the *Dazhangfu* ideal remains unvoiced, the female but masculine *Dazhangfu* will not perish easily. An overwhelming majority of respondents and interlocutors agreed that with increased practice, women masculinize. Not a single interlocutor seriously questioned the *Dazhangfu* ideal. Not even the two Abbesses, the most outspoken critics of sexist practices among my interlocutors, had qualms with the *Dazhangfu* rhetoric. On the contrary, Abbess A. encouraged the nuns to become like men – to masculinize, and Abbess B., although she had criticized the physical transformation belief, often referred to herself as a *Dazhangfu*. And so, most women, even those who are considered highly realized masters, who are exceptionally well educated, or who resent current sexist practices, appear unaware of, or unwilling to critique, the androcentric Chinese cultural construction of the *Dazhangfu*, the 'Great Man', *the* epitome of a good Buddhist practitioner.

☙ *Conclusion* ❧
Androgyny or Androcentrism?
Cultural Determinants and Female Masculinization

> If you seek (enlightenment) relying on Dharma, then masculinity and femininity are not things you can grasp onto. How do we know? Form itself is not male form or female form. If form were male, then all grasses and trees would correspondingly be male; and the same for female (form). People who are deluded do not understand; in their deluded thinking they see male and female (but) that is an illusionary male, an illusionary female; ultimately they are not real (Levering, 1982: 32n.4).[1]

Based on such statements, many take it as axiomatic that Buddhism does not have a problem with gender, as, according to Mahāyāna doctrine, gender is ultimately empty, an illusion only the deluded grasp onto. Even so, today, as in the past, gender hierarchy does surface in different manifestations in Buddhist cultures. Yet gender hierarchies are not categorically accepted. They are questioned, challenged and transformed by women and men.

An exquisite moment of tacit conspiracy pervaded the atmosphere whenever I asked women whether their master was male, or female. If their master was female they responded, without exception, smiling broadly. A moment of silence followed. It was this moment of silence that bespoke of more affection and suffering than all answers I obtained in interviews. Sometimes, more is said by what has been left unsaid. At other times, silence enwraps reality in false pretense. Perhaps it is time to lift this deceiving veil of silence.

While Western and Taiwanese projections of Taiwanese Buddhism as the epitome of gender equality might find an interested audience at home and abroad, gender hierarchy nevertheless emerges in the unceasing flow of everyday practice and in the mirror of unyielding views. This thesis analyzed different manifestations of gender relations in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism. Some chapters depict the persistence of rather negative attitudes toward women, while others analyze changes of emphasis, or point to

[1] Attributed to Bodhidharma, reputedly the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism.

androcentric tendencies taken to the extreme of the rejection, even suppression of (biological) femininity. All in all, these different facets reflect the lives of and beliefs regarding women in a thoroughly androcentric religious world. Although this world is largely controlled by men, it is surreptitiously being invaded by female values, and restructured accordingly.

Hence gender relations in Buddhism in Taiwan are neither an expression of equality, nor are they fully based on inequality, sexism or misogyny. Rather, different forces coexist and different voices are in contest. Yet, androcentrism does pervade Buddhism in Taiwan on a very deep level. The *Dazhangfu*, for instance, has not merely been a soubriquet in vogue since the Song dynasty. It remains a vital ideal today, encouraging women to repress their femininity in a way similar to the enduring attachment to the imagined manliness of the historical Buddha. Nevertheless, my data shows how the higher status of women in institutionalized religion and the numerical predominance of nuns possibly influences Buddhist discourse, in particular with respect to female embodiment. This scenario might suggest the importance of elevated status as a forerunner to transformations of quotidian practice and deeper doctrinal changes.

Gender relations in Buddhism in Taiwan have undoubtedly experienced significant structural changes, concomitant with Taiwan society in general. The higher status of nuns (~70-75% of the clergy are women) and the numerical preponderance of women in Buddhist events might have resulted in a stronger self-confidence. This might have induced changes as evidenced in menstrual taboos and pollution beliefs. The "purification" of Buddhism and the re-assessment of Buddhist scriptures certainly influenced such changes decisively. This interrelation demonstrates the intimate connection between scriptures and beliefs, and the importance of the way in which scriptures are understood, demonstrating how "authentic scriptures" are fundamental to the formation of gendered attitudes. Today,

the power of legitimate scriptures to shape views is greater than that of "indigenous scriptures". Hence my data indicates that views based on outright misogyny, or spurious texts are more likely to change than those based on paternalism, or authentic scriptures. This illustrates not only the power of benevolent paternalism, but also of religious discourse and the authority, which controls it: the clergy. The power of clerical control is conspicuously evident in the diminished currency of texts like the *Blood Bowl Sūtra.* Conversely, the change of attitudes toward menstruation and pollution beliefs seems intricately entwined with the disappearance of such scriptures and related rituals.

Even so, Buddhist discourse in Taiwan still appears to encourage women who are intent on attaining spiritual perfection to masculinize. While religious activity with a secular focus contents itself with role models adhering to traditional femininities, spiritual practice with the aim of soteriological liberation adheres to a distinctively non-feminine ideal. This ideal is best defined as masculine ascetism, or, as Furth denoted a similar phenomenon, an ascetic denial of the body, based on sutric views and indigenous Chinese cultural traditions. Although the transformation of women into men draws on stories in sūtras, religiously sanctioned amenorrhea – the conscious appraisal of secondary amenorrhea in a religious context – seems to be celebrated primarily in Chinese culture. Buddhist sources can therefore not be held responsible for the proliferation of such views. While Buddhist sūtras refer to the transformation of women into men, they do not suggest the spiritual cessation of menstruation. In fact, sexual transformation stories are allegories that seem to have been taken literally *primarily* by Chinese Buddhists. Perhaps, their inclusion in a developed discourse of corporeal transformation generated Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist beliefs and practices which sometimes encourage the rejection of femininity and suppression of menstruation.

Chan Buddhism is believed to have been developed on Chinese soil, adapting to the particularities of Chinese culture. Buddhism, as most scholars today agree, had to change significantly so as to be accepted by the Chinese population as many of its core doctrines opposed traditional Confucian worldviews. This comes to light in the fact that, as mentioned throughout the thesis, most of the texts which propose rather judgmental views of female embodiment are believed to be indigenous Chinese creations. Chinese Buddhist discourses on women therefore differ significantly from those of other traditions.

Although Chan Buddhism is deemed an indigenous Chinese creation, it has been celebrated as a valid path to awakening. It might be argued that Chinese required a different set of practices and injunctions, tailored to their specific culture, to attain liberation, or, perhaps the different Buddhist soteriological goals are entirely determined by the respective cultures. In the same vein, critics might contend the masculinization of female practitioners to be a unique Chinese practice which deconstructs "the Chinese female and feminine" – including Taiwanese constructions. If deconstructed, or transcended, women then presumably attain liberation in its wake. Still, only few have been recorded to have done so (even though this could be the result of androcentric record-keeping). The masculinization of women practitioners *might* be an expedient means – *upāya* – to attain liberation within the specific Chinese cultural context. On the other hand, this interpretation might be an exploitation of the concept *upāya*.

If the masculinization of female Buddhists would be a skilful means, then conversely, masculinity would also require deconstruction. Monastic training certainly works to de-gender habitual patterns grounded in prevailing notions of sex and gender. Although this dissertation did not focus on questions of the deconstruction of masculinity, it amply demonstrates the *ideal* of spiritual cultivation which aims at liberation to be essentially *masculine*, albeit different from secular masculinity. Yet the *Dazhangfu* breaks drastically with

normative models of femininity. While the mainstream ideal of femininity seems rather characterized by constraint, in a sense, the *Dazhangfu* can appear as liberating to those who adhere to traditional feminine ways of being through unshackling the fetters of conventional norms.

Critics could argue that men do not require feminization, that Taiwanese, or Chinese women *need* specific practices and beliefs to disassociate their "true nature" from gender and sex. This is but another sexist argument. Historical evidence illustrates such views not as the product of *women* requiring such views, but of *androcentric* histories, teaching, interpretation and worldviews.

Furthermore, my sojourn in Taiwan indicated the appraisal of ascetic masculinity as working to the detriment of many women practitioners. Most laywomen I met did not aim at full liberation in this lifetime due to the belief that their female rebirth proves their spiritual potential to be inherently inferior. Yet, according to Mahāyāna doctrine, it takes three countless eons to attain Buddhahood. Hence it is likely that for this reason, not all Buddhists aim at attaining full liberation in the present, as is the case in Pure Land Buddhism, where practitioners mainly aim at rebirth in a celestial realm. Correspondingly, one might posit, because such interlocutors were more relaxed in their spiritual practice, they aspired to role models that were within their reach, to traditional femininity, and, had they aspired to attain full liberation, their goals and practices would have differed accordingly.

But if a person is denied self-confidence for religious, or spiritual cultivation from the outset, it is unlikely that such a person develops a strong ambition. If a culture or society stigmatizes the feminine and the female, lauding it only in the context of mainstream models related to motherhood and nurturing, it is plausible that women's wings remain clipped by such expectations. In such a context, it is improbable that women develop a

sense of trust in their own potential so that they spread their wings to attain to cultural, social and spiritual heights. The deconstruction of gender is almost certainly only one feature of liberation. Not only gender needs to be subverted. *Everything* is said to fall to pieces in the dawn of awakening. Although I do not have the right to judge on practices that are accepted by an entire culture, or the wisdom to discriminate whether such practices allow the experience of non-duality to arise, I would like to share some of my reflections on the masculinization of female Buddhists.

Cheng, in reliance on Chern (2000) and Ven. Wu Yin argues the same clothing for monks and nuns to "liberate nuns from socially construed concepts as well as social pressures for women to be skinny and beautiful." She does not contemplate that such monastic ideals are still ideals, and although they might be breaking with contemporary social norms, they are norms that were nonetheless created by social structures, though of a different era. Moreover, they were created in a thoroughly androcentric context, most likely by men. Hence the highly praised allegedly de-gendered monastic ideal was shaped by male norms and assumptions. And so, the question arises whether the soteriologically construed is any better than the purely socially constructed.

Ven. Wu Yin expresses the need to hide the "curve of a nun" to counter women's attachment to their bodies. But in focusing on concealing "the curve", and thereby repressing female embodiment, there is just as much focus on the female body as in focusing on the body itself. In its place emerges a fixation with the repression of femininity. This repression engenders a certain numbness, an unawareness about the whole(some)ness of female embodiment, as part of woman has to be constantly ignored, concealed, repressed, or suppressed. The Buddha was undeniably a man who differed considerably from ordinary males, but did he require his followers to change their physicality to approximate him? Did he deliberately encourage Devadatta to harm himself just because

his body differed due to the major and minor marks, or was it not Devadatta who inflicted harm on himself because he desired them, so as to rival the Buddha?

Has the sexual transformation story in the *Lotus* been (mis)taken for an ultimate truth so much so that for serious women practitioners, masculinization almost equals liberation? Cheng argues that the monastic robe symbolizes the identity of monastics and the transcendence of gender appearance. The fascination with masculinity, in this case reflected in clothing, seems to verge on an obsession with maleness. But, does the transcendence of (female) sex establish enlightenment? Clerical Buddhism in Taiwan appears so thoroughly obsessed with female masculinization that women's (soteriological) liberation becomes almost secondary.

Critics might now counter that I am reifying women, taking "woman" as inherently existent, and thus reinforcing gender and sex constructs. Well, female embodiment is a fact no matter how illusionary it is claimed to be. Ignoring it creates an additional illusion instead of deconstructing the illusion itself. Embodiment does not disappear through repression; hence it might as well be used to grow spiritually, emotionally and mentally. Maybe it would be reasonable to accept the female body instead of rejecting it, so that rather than praying for a male rebirth, women could consider their body (and mind) as a vehicle capable of carrying them to the doorsteps of liberation.

One Buddhist group, Tzu-chi, markedly encroaches on such male hegemony in exploiting images of traditional femininity in the construction of their official role model for the *laity*. While Tzu-chi abides by traditional models of femininity that are clearly connected to those of the domestic sphere, it does require laymen to feminize somewhat. When the *clergy*, however, is at issue, even Ven. Cheng-yen evokes the mainstream ascetic masculine paradigm. I have not met a single person, in Taiwan or abroad, who does not respect Ven. Cheng-yen highly, yet whenever I listed Ven. Cheng-yen as an example of a

highly realized woman, interlocutors hastened to retort that she is actually a *Dazhangfu*, and that she does not look feminine at all. Moreover, they thought her to be an emanation of Guanyin, which puts her beyond the reach of ordinary Buddhists. Correspondingly, as explored in detail, female rebirth is considered either as inherently defiled, or as the reflection of predetermined enlightened will. An outstanding female practitioner cannot possibly be a woman – she must be either a divine being, or a man in disguise. An ordinary practitioner, by contrast, should not be feminine as such testifies to her *and* his spiritual inferiority (a dualistic view quite possibly also pervasive of other Buddhist traditions).

Two days before I left Taiwan in 2003, the person who had in 1999 told me that I had been reborn as a woman due to *negative karma* then suggested that I was actually reborn as a woman because of *choice*. I no longer fitted neatly into the framework of the inherently defiled female in the way I did three years earlier, when I appeared more closely conforming to secular feminine ideals. Both views were deployed by the same individual in different contexts vis-à-vis the same object. The line of reasoning is clear: a Western woman who is fairly fluent in Chinese, receives full ordination and completes a doctorate *must* be a fake female. She cannot possibly be an ordinary woman. And yet I am.

Buddhist discourse in Taiwan markedly favours masculinity over femininity. It thus does not come as a surprise that most interlocutors rejected femininity in one way or the other. Some were aware of it, while others were totally unconscious about doing so. This particularly emerged in the belief of the *Dazhangfu*, where even the most self-confident interlocutors still depicted a good practitioner as inherently masculine. All were unaware of the implication of this view, and only when they questioned me about my views after the interview did they start to reflect about the possibility of attaining awakening in a female or feminine body. Some interlocutors clearly rejected *and* suppressed their femininity. Although they appeared to have had problems with their femininity in gneral, they were dedicated

practitioners who aimed at attaining liberation in this very lifetime. So were the women who knew about the spiritual cessation of menstruation.

As I stated in Chapter Six, I only gathered data about one Taiwanese woman who was said to have experienced this phenomenon, but I met a number of women who claimed to have had spiritual amenorrhea. Due to a current lack of data, I am not fully convinced of the existence of this phenomenon. Yet we may well accept premature menopause to be conceptualized as the spiritual cessation of menstruation among Buddhists in certain instances. Correspondingly, secondary amenorrhea might be caused by a range of factors, but is sometimes theorized in the framework of spiritual amenorrhea.

The question whether menstruation can be put to a halt by religious or spiritual practices requires further interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, as to date – save for the study of Interior Alchemy – no scholar has investigated this issue. However, several studies discuss the connection of secondary amenorrhea and the transmitting of prolactin (Harrell, 1981). Meditation may induce the cascading of certain hormones. Since menstruation is based on complex hormonal processes that might be affected by meditation, a correlation between intense spiritual practice, the cessation of menstruation, and the masculinization of female practitioners could possibly be drawn. However, research regarding this has not even begun. Here, my concern was not with establishing or refuting the existence of these phenomena, but to elucidate their cultural meaning, interpretation and context.

Many of the stories interlocutors related to me bespeak of phenomena that are not scientifically verifiable. Still, some Taiwanese interlocutors had doubts vis-à-vis the spiritual cessation of menstruation. Generally, those who knew of and believed in the spiritual cessation of menstruation were individuals who lived in a spiritually animated universe. The belief in spiritual amenorrhea, no doubt, requires the conviction that not everything is

based on material substance, and that what most consider unimaginable, or mysterious, *can* happen. Interlocutors who believed in spiritual amenorrhea also believed that consciousness can leave the physical body, that one can directly interact with deities and other realms, and some of them claimed to have seen ghosts and so on.

Spiritual amenorrhea and the spiritual cessation of menstruation is only the top of a discursive iceberg. Its foundation, as this thesis demonstrated, is indeed vast. Its earliest stratum was formed in the very days of the Buddha, in his male and perceived masculine embodiment, up to the layers of the historical and contemporary aversion to femininity, female rebirth and female embodiment. The promotion of ascetic masculinity is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it an inert inheritance of the past. Instead, this thesis reveals how its historical valence influences its contemporary endurance. This concept is deeply rooted in Buddhist and Chinese history and thought, in both literature and contemporary practice.

Religion mirrors the society where it is practiced. Just as Taiwan society has witnessed different influences and changes, and experienced much liberalization since the 1970s, Buddhism in Taiwan has concomitantly been affected. And yet, despite these profound changes, certain aspects retain their legitimacy, concepts that are deeply embedded in Chinese (Taiwanese) culture, particularly when closely tied to the conception of the family and gender. Women in Taiwan society have visibly entered the public sphere – previously a male reserve – as politicians, businesswomen, university professors and so on. In a similar way, they have cast their influence on institutionalized religion. Still, it appears – as elsewhere – that such access to male spheres occurs initially only with success if women adopt male and masculine paradigms.

The same holds for Buddhism. As women gain access to those Buddhist spheres which were previously predominantly controlled by men, Buddhist discourse is certain to undergo significant changes, as already evident in pollution beliefs and related matters in

Taiwan. Even so, certain deep-seated cultural assumptions, such as the inherent superiority of men – embedded in traditional Chinese thought as well as Buddhist beliefs – require correspondingly thorough revisions to effect serious changes. Shallow alterations of structures do not suffice to awaken the self-confidence and trust of women in their own spiritual potential and worth – not as semi-men but as women.

The Buddha has been conceived, represented, explained and narrated differently in different cultures and times – depending on the cultural context. While the cultural context in China (and Taiwan) in the past seems to have required particular practices and beliefs, and thus produced a masculine Buddhist ideal, it remains an open question whether contemporary Buddhist women in Taiwan still need this kind of ideal.

> To argue for the possibility of reaching Buddhahood or awakening from within the laws of gender – if there is such a place – is quite different from hastily jumping beyond or past gender, to soar to high metaphysical space, in the hope of getting a blissful birds-eye view of the gendered (low) life on earth. The denial of perspectives is still a perspective that ignores itself, amounts to little more than a pleasant, and rather shallow dream of lightness (Faure, 2003: 332).

A dreaming person is bound to awaken from even the lightest dream, no matter how shallow it may seem – a dream that weighs heavy on the minds of many. Perhaps then, wide awake, the dreamer will find the courage to ground the gaze of the male bird, who, soaring high in the sky, so passionately looks down on the female nest. Then, perhaps, the dreamer will recognize the dream as a dream – and reinvent the Buddha.

Thesis Outline

Interlocutors

Dr Shu studied traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine in Taiwan, Mainland China and the United States. He has been a Buddhist for many years, and has requested ordination twice. He also appears to be involved with a circle of friends who engage in popular religious practices.

Mr Chen is a painter of Buddhist images in his 60s who lives in Taipei city.

Mr Da and Ms Da are both in their mid-thirties, with one baby daughter and one son. Mr Da has been interested in Buddhism since his childhood and converted his wife after they met. He practiced Chinese Buddhism before he converted to Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. He meditates every day and writes a PhD thesis on a Chinese Buddhist writer. Ms Da works as a teacher and holds a Masters degree.

Ms Chen, in her 40s, lives in Taoyuan and frequents a Tibetan Buddhist center. She attends group practice sessions twice a week, and practices for approximately one hour per day. She is a single mother with two sons. She has been a Tibetan Buddhist for about three to four years. Before, she practiced popular religion, or Daoism. She often claimed to be 'stupid', not knowing much. She does manual labor in a factory.

Ms Cheng, 40s, is an academic who has been a Buddhist for many years. Her sister is a fully ordained nun.

Ms Gao, in her early 50s, is a long-standing single lay Buddhist who lived at a temple in the USA for several years. She recites several sūtras, in particular the *Huayan Sūtra* every day. She also attends Tibetan Vajrayāna initiations and teachings and practices one *sadhana* per day. She feels very connected to Guanyin, whose help she invokes whenever she finds herself in need. In the USA, she worked for the temple as the right hand of her teacher, but also as a Dharma teacher. She now lives in Taipei and spends most of her time practicing; her friends support her.

Ms Hui was a Masters student when we met. She is in her early 40s and practices Vajrayāna Buddhism, and *Tajiquan*. Although she has not come out, she appears to be a lesbian. She was involved in artists' and literary circles before she took up her university studies.

Ms Li, in her late twenties, has been a practicing Buddhist for more than a decade. She is a Masters student. Her parents live in Taichung, but she was raised by her grandmother, uncle and aunt. She has been trying to request ordination for several years, which is why she received various teachings in Buddhist temples. She converted to Vajrayāna Tibetan Buddhism 3-4 years ago. Until then, she practiced in the Chinese/Taiwanese tradition.

Ms Lin is a disciple of Abbess B., has been a Buddhist for 4-5 years and recites sūtras every day. She is also a very successful business woman.

Ms Shi, in her 50s, has three daughters and one son and owns her own business. She is a disciple of Abbess B. She has been a Buddhist for many years, and attends sūtra recitations at a Taipei center. She mainly recites the *Diamond* sūtra and meditates. However, she also recites other sūtras, studies books and listens to tapes.

Ms Shu, in her 50s, is an adherent of Vajrayāna Buddhism, but does not commit to any form of daily practice. She is a distant friend of Ms Gao.

Ms Sun is the wife of the president of a Tibetan Vajrayāna Centre in Taoyuan city. She is between 40-50 years old and had practiced Chinese Buddhism for many years before she converted to Tibetan Buddhism. She often practices until late at night. She runs a business together with her husband. She is well informed in Buddhist teachings and doctrines.

Ms Tang, 68, has been not been a Buddhist for a long time, and mentioned that she did not separate popular religion and Buddhism in the past. She does not follow a prescribed practice, but frequents the *Longshan* temple, and participates in various communal activities, such as following the eight Mahāyāna vow precepts, or reciting the Buddha's name events.

Ms Wen, in her 40s, has been a Buddhist for ten years and practices mainly the recitation of the *Ksitigarbha Sūtra*, of whom she had a vision which triggered off her practice. She also practices the morning and evening liturgy and studies sūtras and their commentaries.

Ms Xü, a PhD student in her early 30s, has been a Buddhist for approximately five years. She practices only Vajrayāna *sadhanas*, and does not recite scriptures. She is a self-confident woman who is interested in questions of gender.

Ms Yü, in her early 50s, has been a Buddhist for approximately 10 years. She recites the "Pumenpin" and *Diamond Sūtra* and says mantras every day, and does the morning and evening service.

Ms Zhong, in her 40s, owns a family business with her husband and son. She recites sūtras every day, and watches Buddhist lectures on TV while at work.

Prof. De is a professor of Chinese philosophy. He has been a Buddhist for more than 12 years and was involved in popular religious circles before he converted to Tibetan Buddhism. He does Vajrayāna *sadhanas* and meditates.

Shi Chang, 29, was a co-ordinand. She has lived in Taiwanese temple. She appears well studied in Chinese sūtras and doctrines. Because she grew up within the Taiwanese monastic structure (in the US), she had a very special position and was acquainted with most of the instructors. She was also instrumental in translating for some of the Western nuns. Shi Chang practices in the morning and evening liturgy, likes to prostrate, but apparently not to meditate.

Shi Da, between 50 and 60, was also a co-ordinand. She has practiced Buddhism for some time and was formerly a member of Tzu-chi. At the time of our conversations, she still lived in a flat in Taipei city, but several months later, she moved to a small temple in Taipei county. At first, she had no determined practice apart from the morning and evening liturgy, but Abbess B. suggested her to recite the "Pumenpin".

Shi De, in her mid-forties, is a nun in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition. She has been a practitioner for ten years, and a nun for five. She engages in Esoteric Chinese and Vajrayāna practices. Shi De does not live in a temple. She has her own flat and an adjacent center in Taipei city. She has had several homosexual relationships throughout her life, but neither her friends, nor family know about this. She does not practice in a group and is most of the time on her own, or visits her family. She studies a lot, both sūtras and Vajrayāna literature, and also listens to TV lectures by Taiwanese masters.

Shi Fa, a co-ordinand, is an acquaintance of Shi Da who accompanied us to an interview with Abbess B. She is in her 50s and has been a serious practitioner for many years. She lives in a small temple close to Taipei. She meditates, recites sūtras and Amitabhā's name.

Shi Xiao, a nun in her early 40s, left one of the largest temples in Northern Taiwan because she did not fit into it. She says, she was too happy. She appeared quite distraught when talking about this issue, saying that she does not know why she is so different from Taiwanese nuns. However, she remains in close contact with the temple. She reads widely and does independent research (as opposed to research carried out on behalf of a Buddhist organization).

Shi Xin, in her early 50s, a disciple of Abbess B., lives most of the time in Kaohsiung. She sometimes does the morning and evening liturgy, and recites sūtras, but most of her daily chores relate to house/temple-keeping.

Shi Wu is 52, and has been a nun for about a decade but does not practice formally as she thinks she is not good enough to do so. She was ordained because she wanted to give her life some meaning. She studies sūtras and lives at the temple of Abbess B., though she is not her disciple.

Three ladies from Taipei. They are close friends and met at the *Longshan* temple. Two of them are single mothers. Interestingly, interlocutor C, who was still in a relationship at the time, had more traditional views. These three women appeared very self-confident. They recite sūtras and meditate little. From time to time, they spend several days at a temple in Northern Taiwan, where thy help in the kitchen. This is the time when they practice most.

Abbess A. is abbess of a prestigious temples in Taiwan. Her details must therefore remain undeclared.

Abbess B. is abbess of several temples in Taiwan. Her identity must remain concealed, too.

Chinese Questionnaire

各位師姐, 各位的師兄,

本人 (*Bhiksunī* Yeshe Chökyi Lhamo (釋)依喜卻吉拉茉) 是中央研究院與澳大利亞國立大學的民族所博士班的學員. 因爲西方對於臺灣的佛教修行方法, 經驗以及觀念的智識很少, 所以準備了這份問卷, 希望藉著各位所提供的資料能更爲瞭解臺灣的佛教.

麻煩您回答一些簡單的問題. 我們保證問卷上您的個人資料是不公開, 不另做他用.

我們很感激您的合作.

祝您和平而成就

Yeshe Chökyi Lhamo
January 2003

1. 您是否　在家眾 □　或 出家眾 □?
2. 您是否　　男眾 □　或　　女眾□?
3. 年齡 _____
4. 出生的地方 _____
5. 未婚□　結婚□　離婚□ 單身□
6. 教育程度：

   小學□　中學□　高中□　專科□　大學□　碩士□　博士□
7. 現在的工作 _____
8. 是否信佛?　是□　否□
9. 您接觸佛法多久了?_____
10. 您修甚麼法門 (比如淨土,禪宗,密宗...等等)? _____
11. 您皈依那位法師? _____
12. 您跟那位法師做學習?_____
13. 您一般的話去哪些寺廟/中心?_____
14. 您有沒有受過:

    a.　三皈□　b.五戒□　c.在家菩薩戒□　d.式叉摩女戒□

    e.沙彌沙彌尼戒□　　f.三壇大戒□

    15. 您何時受戒的?_____

    16. 如果沒有的話, 您是否想受戒? 想□ 不想□

    17. 想受何種戒？_____
18. 在何種因緣下使您想到學佛? (請您敘述說明)
19. 怎樣才算是個很有修行的人? (請您描寫您他/她的行爲, 樣子等等)
20. 您認識佛教信徒者之中您覺得誰最有修行, 請舉例說明可以嗎?
21. 您平常都修何種法門? (請您詳細說明)
22. 您靜坐嗎？ 是□　否□　多久_____
23. 您唸佛號嗎? 是□　否□　多少_____
24. 您唸咒語嗎? 是□　否□　多少_____
25. 您每天有固定時間修法嗎?

    我每天修____ 個鐘頭/每個禮拜修_____ 個鐘頭.
26. 您誦/讀佛經嗎? 是□　否□
27. 您平常讀那部經? (請您詳細說明)

28. 您知道那幾部經?

29. 您是否讀*觀無量壽經*/*南無阿彌陀經*? 是□ 否□

30. 要如何方能往生西方極樂世界?

31. 您是否相信由修行您能往生西方極樂世界? 能□ 不能□

32. 您是否讀*妙法蓮花經*? 是□ 否□

33. *地藏王菩薩經*呢? 是□ 否□

34. *金剛般若波羅密經*呢? 是□ 否□

35. *華嚴經*呢? 是□ 否□

36. *血盆經*這個名字您有沒有聽過? 有□ 無□

a. 您有沒有讀過這部經? 有□ 無□

b. 甚麼緣因您讀這部經而您對這部經有甚麼看法? (請詳述)

37. 您是否做早晚課? 是□ 否□

38. 您曾經參加過法會□? 何種法會? _____

39. 您曾經參加過閉過關□? 或八關齋戒□? 何種閉關? _____

40. 一般在寺廟裡面您參加那些課程? (請您詳細說明)

41. 您覺得做善事是否等於修行的方式? 是□ 否□

或者只是修福報而已 □?

42. 您認爲平常生活上何種清況對您的修行有幫助?

43. 您認爲平常生活上何種清況對您的修行有限制?

44. 對於每日何種狀態下您無法持之以恆的修法用功? (請您詳細說明)

45. 您覺得女眾甚麼時候都能夠去寺廟嗎?能□ 不能□

46. 女眾甚麼時候都能夠修法嗎? 能□ 不能□

47. 女眾甚麼時候都能夠唸佛號嗎? 能□ 不能□

48. 女眾甚麼時候都能夠參加法會嗎? 能□ 不能□

49. 女眾甚麼時候都能夠靜坐嗎? 能□ 不能□

50. 女眾甚麼時候不能夠靜坐等等? (請您詳細說明)

51. 女眾爲甚麼不能夠靜坐等等? (請您詳細說明)

52. 對男眾來講有沒有這種修行的休息(限制)? (請您詳細說明)

53. 您認爲誰的修行進步比較快:

a.男比女快□ b.女比男快□ c.平等的□

54. 您覺得修行上有沒有差別:

a.男比女好□ b.女比男好□ c.沒有差別□

55. 男眾或女眾何者較能倡導佛教的道理:

a.男比女好□ b.女比男好□ c.沒有差別□

56. 如果您的配偶是修行人您覺得誰能修得比較好:

a.他她比我好□ b.我比他她好□ c.沒有差別□

57. 您有沒有聽過佛經裡關於女眾變成男眾的事蹟？ 例如: *妙法蓮花經*中所提到成佛的龍女? 您覺得這種女是何種因緣形會轉成男眾:

a. 她們是開悟的女眾□

b. 她們爲了開悟而形成男眾□

c. 因證悟而了知此身是業報幻化而成的□

58. 女眾能不能成佛? 能□ 不能□

59. 您覺得男女成佛的能力有差別嗎? 有□ 沒有□

60. 您感覺男性比女性對開悟的可能性比較高嗎? (請您詳細說明)

61. 男女眾對修行來講的差別在哪裡?

62. 您會不會覺得女眾的業障/障礙比男眾嚴重? 會□ 不會□

63. "如果女眾精進修持的話她們月事會停止."

您有沒有聽過這個說法? 有□ 無□

64. 您相信嗎? 相信□ 不相信□

65. 女性如何能夠停止月事? (請您述說)

66. 您是否認識一位因爲她個人精進修持而停止月事? (請您描寫她)

67. 男眾有沒有類似的情況? 有□ 無□

68. 當男眾對修行而言有甚麼特別得缺點跟優點?

69. 當女眾對修行而言有甚麼特別得缺點跟優點?

70. 有沒有女眾大丈夫? 有□ 無□

71. 請您描寫大丈夫 (的樣子, 外表, 行爲, 心態 等等) 跟女眾大丈夫:

72. 如果女眾修行好的話是否越來越像男眾一樣? 是□ 否□

English Questionnaire

Dear Dharma Brother, Dear Dharma Sister,

I, *Bhiksunī* Yeshe Chökyi Lhamo, am a PhD student at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, and the Australian National University. Because there is little knowledge in the West about the practice, experiences and beliefs of Taiwanese Buddhism, (I) have prepared this questionnaire, hoping that the questions raised will enable us to gain a better understanding of Taiwanese Buddhism.

Please be so kind and answer a few simple questions. We assure that your personal information in the questionnaire is confidential and will not be used for other purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation
Wishing you peace and attainments

Yeshe Chökyi Lhamo
January 2003

1. Are you a Householder or a Monastic?
2. Are you male or female?
3. Age:
4. Place of birth:
5. Marital Status: non-married, married, divorced, single
6. Highest Education Received: a. Primary School b. Middle School c. High School d. College e. University f. Masters g. PhD
7. Present Occupation:
8. Are you a Buddhist?
9. How long have you been a Buddhist?
10. Which tradition do you follow?
11. Who is your refuge master?
12. Under whose guidance do you study?
13. Which temples do you visit?
14. Have you received:

a. Refuge b. Lay vows c. Bodhisattva vows d. Probationary ordination e. Novice vows f. Full ordination?

15. When did you take these vows?
16. If not, are you considering taking any of the above vows?
17. Which ones?
18. How did you become a Buddhist? *(Please recount details)*
19. What characterizes a good practitioner? *(Please describe them, their appearance, behavior)*
20. Among contemporary Taiwanese Buddhists, who do you think is the best practitioner?
21. Which practices do you generally engage in? (*Please explain in detail*)
22. Do you meditate? For how long?
23. Do you recite the Buddha's name? How many times?
24. Do you recite *mantras*? How many?
25. Do you have a set time for practice every day? How many hours do you practice per day/week?
26. Do you recite sūtras?
27. Which sūtra(s) do you generally recite?
28. Which sūtras do you know?
29. Do you read/recite the *Long Amitabha Sūtra*?

30. How can people get to the Western Paradise?

31. Do you think that you will be able to go there on account of your practice?

32. Do you recite the *Lotus Sūtra*?

33. How about the *Kistigarbha Sūtra*?

34. How about the *Diamond Sūtra*?

35. How about the *Avatamska Sūtra*?

36. Have you heard of the name *Blood Bowl Sūtra*?

a. Have you ever recited it?

b. Due to which cause did you read this sūtra, and what do you think of it? *(Please recount details)*

37. Do you do the morning and evening liturgy?

38. Do you participate in Dharma meetings? What kind of Dharma activities do you participate in?

39. Do you participate in retreats or the Mahāyāna 8-vows fasting? If so, what kind of retreat?

40. What kind of activities/classes do you generally engage in the temple?

41. Do you consider 作善事 (doing virtuous deeds) as a way of practicing Buddhism, or is it jus a means to accumulate merit?

42. In everyday life, what do you think enhances your practice?

43. What restricts your practice?

44. Under what kinds of circumstances is it impossible for you to practice? *(Please explain in detail)*

45. Do you think that women can go to temples at any time?

46. Do you think that women can practice at any time?

47. Do you think that women can recite the Buddha's name at any time?

48. Do you think that women can join Dharma meetings at any time?

49. Do you think that women can meditate at any time?

50. When can women not meditate and so on? *(Please explain in detail)*

51. Why can women not meditate and so on? *(Please explain in detail)*

52. Is there such an injunction for men?

53. Who do you think is quicker in spiritual practice?

   a. Men are quicker than women.

   b. Women are faster than men.

c. They are equal.

54. Do you think that vis-à-vis practice there is a difference?

d. Men are better than women.

e. Women are better than men.

f. No difference.

55. Are women or men better at leading the teachings?

a. Men are better.

b. Women are better.

c. No difference.

56. If you have a partner who is a Buddhists practitioner, who do you think is a better practitioner?

a. S/He is better than me.

b. I am better than s/he.

c. There is no difference.

57. Do you know of stories in sūtras in which women transform into men? For example, the *Lotus Sūtra* refers to a Dragon girl who becomes a Buddha. Under what kind of circumstance do you think did these kind of women transform into men?

a. They were enlightened women.

b. They became male so as to attain enlightenment.

c. Due to their enlightenment, they realized that this body is a karmic retribution, an illusion?

58. Can women attain Buddhahood?

59. Do you think that there is a difference in the potential of women and men versus the attainment of Buddhahood?

60. Do you think that the spiritual potential to attain enlightenment is higher in men than in women?

61. What difference in terms of spiritual practice is there between men and women?

62. Do you believe that women's negative karmic propensities/(mental) obstructions are heavier than those of men?

63. Have you ever heard of the theory that women stop menstruating as their spiritual practice develops?

64. Do you believe this to be true?

65. How can women stop their menstruation? *(Please recount details)*

66. Have you ever met a woman who, due to spiritual prowess, stopped menstruating? *(Please describe her)*

67. Is there a similar phenomenon in men?

68. What specific advantage and disadvantage has being a man with regard to spiritual practice?

69. What specific advantage and disadvantage has being a woman with regard to spiritual practice?

70. Are there female *Dazhangfus* "Great Men"?

71. Please describe the *Dazhangfu* and the female *Dazhangfu* (their appearance, behavior, mind-set etc).

72. If women are good practitioners, do they increasingly resemble men?

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